真・天地無用！ 魎皇鬼外伝

# 天地無用！ GXP 5

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SHIN TENCHI MUYO! RYO-OHKI GAIDEN

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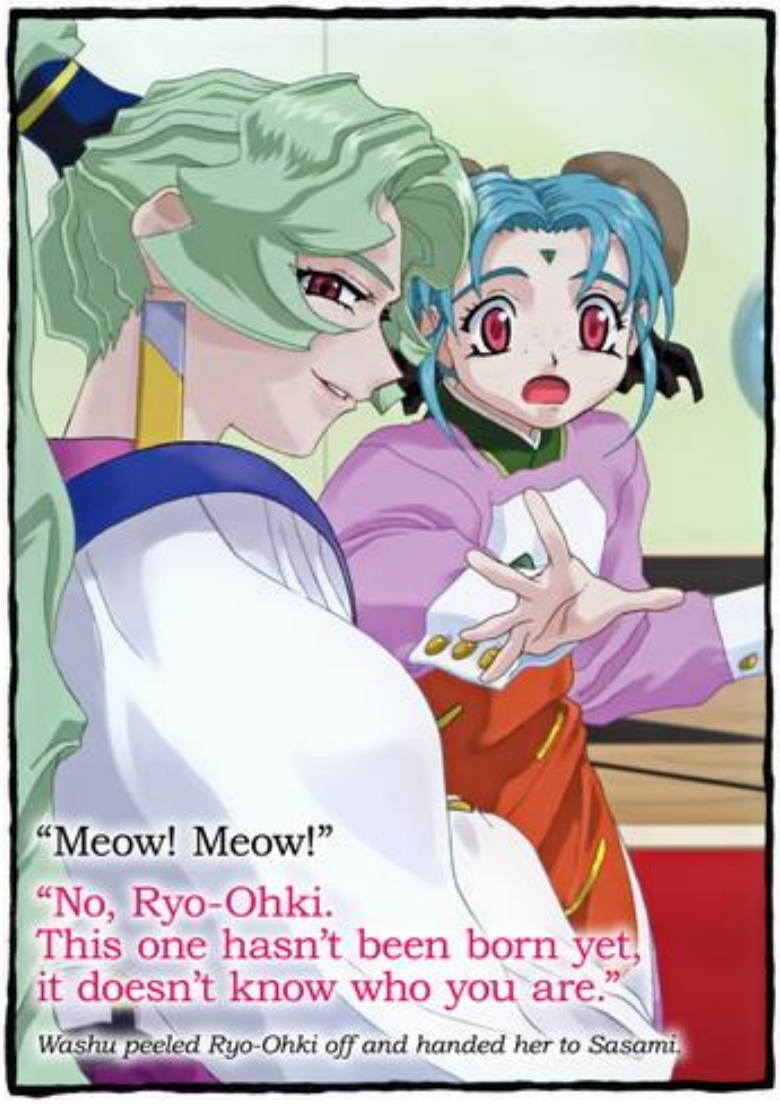
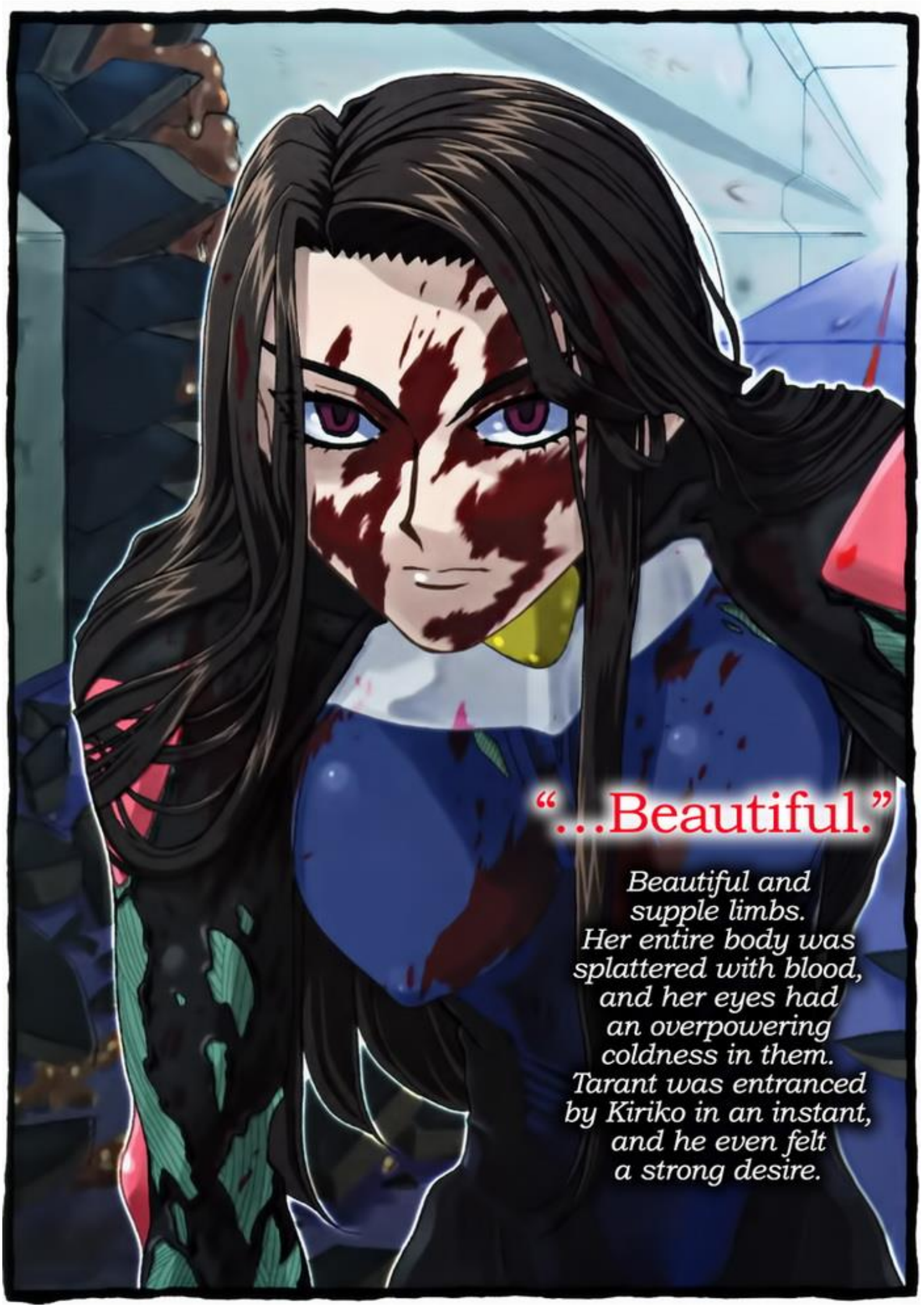
"...Tenchi-senpai's older sister?"
The differences between Tennyo and Kiyone, as far as could be seen through old photos and vague memories, was their hairstyle alone. They were the same in every other way.


"Meow! Meow!"
"No, Ryo-Ohki.
This one hasn't been born yet,
it doesn't know who you are."
Washu peeled Ryo-Ohki off and handed her to Sasami.


“...Beautiful.”
Beautiful and supple limbs. Her entire body was splattered with blood, and her eyes had an overpowering coldness in them. Tarant was entranced by Kiriko in an instant, and he even felt a strong desire.

**Shin Tenchi Muyo! Ryo-Ohki Gaiden**

# Tenchi Muyo! GXP5

Masaki Kajishima

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## Chapter One: Decision and Reunion

“Birth and death come equally to all humans.” It's a common saying, but equality exists only in that single moment. The journey between birth and death is profoundly unequal.

Masaki Kiriko and Amane Kaunaq had been called to an emergency meeting at GP Headquarters, where a GP Academy student had been among the victims of the Tarrant attack. They were sitting on a bench in the hallway in front of the GP Headquarters conference room 012445, looking pale and nervous. The Academy's home planet, visible through the window that took up the entire wall in front of them, shone blue, and the continent on which the GP Academy was located was within sight.

“…Seina-chan.”

As Kiriko looked out at the GP Academy facilities, which could be seen from satellite orbit, she imagined how shocked Seina must have been after hearing the details from Elma, and frowned even more. Noticing this, Amane slowly placed her hand on Kiriko's clenched hand.

“Amane…”

Amane must have been thinking the same thing, as she stared intently at the same spot as Kiriko.

“Hmm? Looks like the meeting's over.”

Suddenly, the weight of Amane's hand on Kiriko's eased.

“…Looks like it.”

Kiriko noticed the atmosphere in the conference room relax at Amane's words. However, the atmosphere that drifted from there was by no means harmonious.

The door opened, and the GP executives came out of the conference room with uniformly stiff expressions. The hatred-like feelings flowing between the GP personnel in their blue uniforms and the military personnel in their green uniforms was so clear that it was obvious even to those who were unfamiliar with the circumstances of both parties.

“Tsk.”

One of the military executives looked at Kiriko and Amane with a look of obvious contempt.

--Why are these little girls here?

The executives knew who had invited Kiriko and Amane to be there. But because they were there as GP members, they were glaring at them with obvious displeasure, partly as a way of taking out their frustrations on them. Even they seemed a little embarrassed to look directly at the beautiful Amane, and subtly averted their gazes.

“……Ah”

Amidst the uncomfortable atmosphere, Amane spotted one man.

Kuramitsu Nakita, Kuramitsu Mitoto's husband and Mihoshi's father. Amane had known him since childhood.

“Uncle…”

Feeling uneasy, Amane looked at Nakita as if clinging to him… But what came back from from him was the same stern gaze as the other executives. Like a puppy scolded by its master, Amane took a step back, hung her head, and stood completely still, not moving an inch, until the executives had passed.

“Thank you for your hard work.”

When the executives attending the meeting had all left, Mikami came out of the conference room and called out to Kiriko and Amane with a wry smile.

“I should have had you wait somewhere else.” Mikami gently placed a hand on Amane's slumped shoulder.

“No, please don't worry about it.”

Mikami smiled brightly at Amane's words and began walking down the hallway in the opposite direction the executives had taken. Immediately, a thick partition descended behind them. The windows darkened, transforming the hallway into a completely soundproof, sealed chamber.

“It's troubling that the Galactic Federation has been around for over 10,000 years, yet we're still dragging on the relationship between Seniwa and Jurai.”

Kiriko looked a little surprised when she heard Mikami's complaining words, which were unusual for her.

“Um… did something happen at the meeting?”

“Hohoho, I'm worried because there's been no progress. Every time an incident like this occurs, it's the same old story—either enhancing GP equipment or expanding the GP military… It's all so predictable, such a waste of time.

(They must have had quite the argument between Mikami-sama and Nakita-sama.)

Mikami's grumbling stemmed from Nakita being the leading advocate for military expansion. Facing Mikami—the most powerful figure within the Kuramitsu family, Seniwa's de facto rulers—military officials inevitably held back. Nakita was practically the only one who could speak his mind to Mikami without flinching. That was precisely why the military kept pushing Nakita to the forefront.

“Well, the GP was originally founded as the private army of the Kuramitsu family, so it's inevitable that such thoughts are deeply rooted…”

“There's no need to protect Nakita. That's his job after all… Sorry for making you listen to an old woman's complaints, ha ha ha.”

“…Um, were we called here because of Seina-kun after all?”

“Yes. I thought it best for you to know the truth behind this incident.”

“The truth…?”

The official announcement stated that “the relay station ship was attacked by unknown assailants and completely destroyed.” The fact that she called them together to tell them the “truth” implied they knew the details about the attackers but were deliberately withholding that information.

“Just to be clear, what I'm about to say is strictly confidential. Those who need to know will be informed by appropriate channels. Understood?”

“Yes.”

Kiriko and Amane exchanged a glance, then nodded slowly. Confirming this.

Mikami exhaled deeply and said, “The attacker was Tarrant Shank,” She declared with a stern expression.

“!”

Hearing Mikami's words, Amane and Kiriko's eyes widened, and they gasped involuntarily.

There was an unspoken rule between the pirates and the GP that they would not attack any further once they had made a certain amount of profit. However, there were many pirates who were vicious, many who thought nothing of taking people's lives for fun. Among them, the man named Tarrant was a truly vicious man worthy of the name pirate. The two instantly understood why the information had been withheld.

“Seina-kun's presence is becoming too great for the Galactic Federation to ignore. However, there are also those who are not happy about this… and this is not something that can only be said about the pirates.”

“Are you saying that Seina-kun's presence is becoming a nuisance to the military?”

“For the GP too.”

“No way!”

“It's true that thanks to Seina-kun, we've been able to arrest a large number of dangerous criminals. But there's also the question of whether he's attracting a huge number of potential criminals. Couldn't that ultimately lead to more crime being committed? That's the concern.”

“That's a baseless accusation. At least on Earth, it never happened!”

“And will there be retaliation from the pirates?”

“That's—”

Seina's mass capture of pirates would drastically reduced the pirate forces. Fearful of losing their power, the pirates would become desperate, even reckless, and risk breaking the unspoken rules with the GP. Kiriko couldn't refute Mikami's words.

“Is this about… that?”

The mobile relay station ship that was attacked belonged to the Decoy Division's Second Section, and was secretly isolating two people, Radi Shank and Al Shank, who were captured during Seto-sama’s operation.

“So Tarrant's goal was to recapture them?”

However, Mikami quietly shook her head at Kiriko's question.

“It seems nearly all the victims on that ship, including those two, were in a state that required genetic verification. And eighty-five people were abducted, including three students from our academy.”

“Th-that…”

Kiriko and Amane stood frozen in place, stunned by the implications of Mikami's words.

“So Tarrant's next target is… Seina-kun?”

“That would be the most effective approach, I suppose.”

“Effective?”

“Judging by how he killed his own father and brothers despite being in a position to save them, Tarrant seems to be a man with considerable pride. Jurai and Seto-sama captured Radi and Al… The appropriate retaliation for capturing high-ranking members would be killing someone of Minaho-sama, Kanemitsu-dono, or Seto-sama's caliber.”

“But that's… that's going too far…”

“Yes, that would be far too risky. Jurai is a country where the higher you go, the stronger the

individual, not the organization. Even if they were to attack when they were most vulnerable, it would be impossible to take on a member of the royal family who possesses a Royal Tree using a conventional attack… And even if they tried to deal with Seto-sama, who controls Jurai's intelligence…”

“Well, he's the worst possible kind of opponent you could face. Staying out of Seto-sama's reach is the only way to be safe, because if you try to mess with her… you won't get off scot-free.”

“Like a moth flying into the flame… indeed.”

“That's how it would be.”

At this point, Mikami said nothing, but Tarrant had already deployed several organizations to take action against Seto's associates. However, all of them had been annihilated, and some of them were even used to trace back to the organization itself.

“So, Seina-kun is an easy target…”

As if reacting to Kiriko's words, Mikami paused, keeping a slight distance, and turned to face Kiriko and Amane.

“About an hour ago, video catalogs of all the abducted individuals were sent to the GP, relevant agencies, and the media.” Mikami said expressionlessly. There was not a shred of hope in her tone.

“That means… ransom for the bodies…” Kiriko murmured unconsciously.

“GP headquarters has refused that deal. Next, they'll naturally try to contact the families directly… We've placed surveillance on everyone to ensure the families don't find out. Of course, we'll tell the truth to those who cooperate.”

“Even with an information agreement, based on past examples, isn't it only a matter of time before it becomes known?”

“If it spreads widely online, it'll be impossible to contain. In Tarrant's case, he has a thrill-seeker side, so he probably won't mind the backlash…”

Tarrant's ultimate target was Seina. Whether it was public opinion or individuals, he didn't care as long as he could get information that connected to Seina.

“If even one person takes action against Seina-kun…” Kiriko's expression darkened as she murmured.

“Considering Seina's bad luck, that risk is high. Galaxy Academy is a place prone to that kind of trouble, after all.”

“Therefore, it's crucial to swiftly and quietly suppress this incident. However, the matter of the leaked files isn't a problem.”

“It's already been handled? But how?”

“It's a silver lining, I suppose… but the new system we implemented has proven useful. Any suspicious files were deleted the instant they hit the net, and all involved parties have been identified and detained. As for direct rumors and distribution via memory sticks, we've requested the experts handle that.”

(Experts… That must be Washu-sama… But)

Washu's survival hasn't been made public yet. If it were known, the Academy might descend into chaos.

“Is that acceptable?”

“Since you accepted the task, that's how it is.”

But in a case like this, her presence was reassuring. The Academy's “Principal” title wasn't just for show. Within the Academy's barrier, there was no information she couldn't obtain when she put her mind to it.

(Come to think of it, the system introduced this time was also Washu-sama's creation. But…)

But Washu, like Seto, wouldn't coddle Kiriko and the others. The hurdles for tasks they must solve were ridiculously high. If they slacked even a little, especially in life-threatening situations, they would be left to fend for themselves.

“Why in the world would they put such important figures aboard something like a mobile relay station ship? Who made that decision…?”

“They apparently transferred them citing a system failure at the Academy. I guess they were trying to outwit him.”

Interrupting Kiriko's words, Mikami turned and started walking again—a clear refusal to pursue the topic further.

(There's no point in investigating the cause now. I'll ask Airi-sama about the NB phenomenon later. The real problem is Seina-chan…)

Kiriko and Amane started walking as if chasing after Mikami.

“Even without revealing the worst information, the mere fact that a friend was killed will be shocking enough for them. Therefore, this afternoon we'll gather all the freshmen and explain this incident, followed by a practical session on psychological self-care… It's a bit early, but this will be their first aptitude test.” Mikami stated in a matter-of-fact tone, her back still turned. Yet, a heavy, agonized atmosphere emanated from her back.

While Mikami discussed the meeting results with Kiriko and Amane, the military division's leadership walked through the soundproof, sealed-off private passageway. Unlike during the meeting, they now wore cheerful expressions.

“Things went exactly as we planned,” one of the leaders remarked with satisfaction.

This prompted the others to begin chatting animatedly.

“Assigning Yamada Seina to the decoy division was, in a sense, the natural course of events. But securing Masaki Kiriko as an observer is the real achievement.”

“Indeed. Though she's a Masaki, she was originally a military intelligence officer… And an exceptionally capable one at that. That's why she wasn't put under the watch of the GP.”

“But this manpower shortage during enrollment season… Can't we do something about it? It's unbearable that even military intelligence officers are being drafted into immigration control.”

“Exactly. I was shocked when old woman Mikami forced her transfer to GP Academy.” As he said this, one of the leaders glanced at Nakita.

“If it was for managing Yamada Seina, then it couldn't be helped. But thanks to that, we managed to get him on our side.”

The leaders nodded in satisfaction at Nakita's response.

“Precisely, precisely. Now if we can shift our role from being a decoy to defeating the pirates…”

The decoy division's primary purpose was to draw pirate attacks away, ensuring cargo reached its destination safely. Of course, they didn't leave pirates unchecked, but attaching military vessels or GP battleships to every single decoy ship operating in large numbers was uneconomical. However, if they could reliably draw pirates in, transitioning from decoy to extermination became feasible.

“…Our need is increasing, and it is possible to incorporate the decoy division into the military.”

As the leader spoke, Nakita noticed Misao waiting at the high-ranking official port entrance.

“Well then, I must hurry. Excuse me.” Nakita practically fled, walking quickly away from them before boarding the ship that had come to pick them up together with Misao.

“Thank you for your hard work.”

“Good work.”

Nakita hurried to the ship's bridge, returned the salute to the crew saluting him, and took his seat in the VIP section.

“Looks like the meeting went well.” Misao, seated next to Nakita, remarked while watching the military leadership displayed on the external surveillance monitor.

“Don't try to pry into your superiors' feelings.”

“In contrast… Mikami-sama's attendants looked rather downcast…” Misao said calmly, while glaring at Nakita, then waved to the captain.

Taking that as a signal, the ship carrying them launched into space.

“Given my position, that attitude was unavoidable. Amane-chan was here as a GP, and moreover, as a subordinate of Aunt Mikami. Mixing business with pleasure would affect her standing too.” Nakita glanced at Misao, then sighed with an annoyed look.

“Of course I understand that. But since I've now established direct connections with both Amane-san and Kiriko-san, ultimately, I'm the one who'll suffer the consequences. Surely I have the right to vent a little, don't I ?”

Misao’s soon-to-be fiancé, named Mashisu, was Misao's older sister, Mihoshi's former colleague, and now Seto's adopted daughter. Amane was a friend, and Kiriko was a relative.

“So you've been chained up by that old hag’s alliance too… Oh well.”

“I'm quite satisfied with my current situation, though.”

“Hmph… Well, good luck.”

“Still, Father, this meeting is pointless as ever. Spending time on something like this is nothing but a waste, don't you think?” Misao addressed him as Father because his remarks essentially constituted criticism of the upper echelons. Thus, this conversation remained strictly between father and son.

“But without a forum for discussion, the gap of pointless conflict will only widen. Even if it doesn't solve the root problem, it at least brings some kind of result.”

“Hmm… So that Yamada Seina-kun is going to the decoy division?”

“Well, considering his traits, there's really no other choice for him…” Saying this, Nakita closed his eyes and leaned back deeply into his chair.

Just then, “Hey. What about Seina-chan?” Mitoto, who shouldn't have been there, was leaning over Nakita with a mop in hand.

“Hey, Misao-chan. What's up with Seina-chan?”

Seeing Nakita look away, Mitoto turned towards Misao.

“Yamada Seina-kun has been assigned to the decoy division. But since the official order hasn't been issued yet, please keep it confidential.”

“Oh my. Well then, once it's officially announced, we'll have to celebrate, won't we?”

Accustomed to Mitoto's sudden appearances, the two men weren't particularly surprised and continued talking as if Mitoto had been there all along. However, the bridge crew couldn't help but show some visible unease.

“I-I'm terribly sorry. The ship's systems showed no abnormalities during the pre-departure checks…” A newly assigned operator frantically began checking the instruments.

“Calm down. That is Mitoto-sama. It's not your fault.”

“Huh?…That woman, um?”

Seeing their superior's wry smile, the operator regained his composure, stopped checking, and looked toward Mitoto.

“But if he's in the decoy division… Is Seina-chan joining the military?”

“Whoa, whoa. We're not even talking about an official appointment yet. He hasn't even graduated. In fact, he just had his entrance ceremony a few weeks ago. That's a long way off. More importantly, Mitoto. This is still classified information, so don't go spreading it around as gossip! Not even to people connected to Yamada Seina, or to him personally!”

“R-right…”

“Now, get back to your duties. Misao and I have work to do too.”

With that, Nakita and Misao opened their document files and began checking them. Mitoto, looking satisfied, picked up a mop and started cleaning the floor.

(The cleaning team is busy cleaning on the bridge during regular military operations…) The young operator worked uncomfortably, feeling a strange sense of incongruity. But he noticed that the veteran crew members, who appeared calm, were definitely aware of Mitoto.

(Right… this situation really is abnormal.) Recognizing this, the young crew member paradoxically felt reassured and began concentrating on his work. As his agitation subsided, the bridge gradually returned to its usual atmosphere.

But Nakita was worried for a different reason. (The Demon Princess of Jurai didn't take Yamada Seina under her wing because she must have anticipated this situation…)

Since the establishment of the Galactic Federation, security within the Federation stabilized rapidly. Consequently, the role of the GP military diminished, with police duties and delivery services becoming the core of its activities. This shift occurred not only due to the stabilization of security but also because many planets disliked the intimidating aura of the GP's parent organization, Seniwa's private military. Of course, the GP military included forces from many planets, including Jurai. Nevertheless, Seniwa's influence within the GP military remained overwhelmingly dominant.

As personnel from across the Federation began gathering within the GP, its organizational structure gradually underwent transformation. The reduction in equipment disparities between the police and military branches, facilitated by technological transfers from the Academy, accelerated this shift. While the GP organization expanded, the military's scale was reduced, and it was eventually treated as a specialized division within the GP Police

Department.

The military's role was defense against external threats to the Federation. In extreme terms, the military's primary raison d'être was piracy countermeasures, and even that was almost exclusively limited to extermination, not arrest. The number of pirates captured by Yamada Seina and the mass apprehension of criminals on the Academy's homeworld were sufficient to shake the very foundation of the military's existence.

(The military brass's agitation was beyond imagination… By keeping Yamada Seina even partially under our control, we managed to suppress their discontent.)

The military could not act without a request from the police department. Within that framework, the decoy division, due to its anti-piracy nature, was an area where the military held relatively strong influence.

(So Masaki Kiriko-kun is our escort monitor… It's not that we lack personnel, but no one else is as close to Yamada Seina as she is. Ultimately, she'll likely side with Yamada Seina over the military… Still, if she becomes the GP's escort monitor, it'll be far more troublesome, and the military's turmoil will be significant.) As Nakita considered this, the image of Seto, grinning smugly, flashed through his mind.

(That damn old hag… She must have seen it coming. She's neatly foisted the best possible candidate onto Jurai too.) Even as he thought this, Nakita wore a satisfied smile.

“Are you sure you don't need me to take you all the way to the dorm building?” Elma leaned out the car window, looking up at Seina with concern.

“Yes. Thank you very much.” Seina said as her smiled at Elma.

He then turned on his heel and started walking away. His back was straight and dignified, looking nothing like the boy who had been curled up crying in the car seat just moments before. But to Elma, that very composure seemed painfully poignant.

“Seina-kun…” Without realizing it, Elma had grabbed the hem of Seina's clothes.

“?? Elma-san?”

For a moment, Seina thought his hem had caught on something and reached down to check. But when he realized it was Elma's hand, he looked at her curiously.

“…Be careful of Shiba-boars.” Elma, confused by her own actions, stared intently at Seina's face.

Only after confirming she didn't sense the smell of death in his expression did she finally release her grip.

“Huh? …Oh, right. Well, I'll be off then.”

Remembering how many times he'd been caught up in Shiba-boar rampages around the dorm, Seina cautiously scanned his surroundings. He bowed to Elma and started walking towards the dorm again.

(The moment he gets something, he loses it… He's grown too accustomed to that.) Watching his retreating figure, Elma let out a deep sigh.

(Seina-kun… is merely existing. He's missing something vital, not truly living as a person.)

To Elma, it seemed as if a gaping hole had opened up inside Seina. Before long, his retreating figure began to blur like a mayfly.

Wiping away blurred tears, Elma started the aircar, its engine roaring a bit roughly.

Seina walked towards the dorms, his eyes scanning the road, feeling a sense of deep emotion.

Even with the emergency recall, there was still plenty of time before the dorm assembly. Of course, getting there as quickly as possible was best, and the usual Seina would have headed straight for the dorm. But the Seina of now needed a moment to think.

“I've only been here for about a month…” Seina mumbled as he thought back to the first time he had come here, brought by Airi.

The path he walked, filled with hope—for Seina, it had been the ultimate happiness. But now he was faced with the reality of being in the GP, the worst possible outcome that Kiriko had feared: death.

(Worst-case scenario… but that's my everyday life now, isn't it…) Seina mused absentmindedly as he walked along the path that ran through the giant trees.

“I want to be in space, to go even farther. Seto-sama and many others told me my misfortune was necessary. That's why I like it here… But… Am I really allowed to be here?”

That was what troubled Seina.

(Could it be that Miki-senpai suffered that fate because she met me…?) Seina shook his head, trying to banish that fear.

“I'm used to enduring all kinds of unpleasant things. But for others to suffer because of me…”

This was something Seina had been asking himself since childhood. It was because of this thought that Seina had abandoned every possibility. Having endured countless pains, Seina

had become skilled at dealing with his own physical and mental suffering. But precisely because of that, he reacted to others' pain with an almost terrifying intensity.

“I should probably… go back to Earth… but…”

Letting go of something precious once he had it was a common occurrence for Seina. But what he had gained here was something truly worthy of being called ‘bliss’. Letting it go was not easy, even for Seina.

(I want to stay here.) For Seina, it was the most selfish thing he'd ever wanted in his entire life.

“But I want to stay here… I want to stay!” Seina yelled with determination.

(Just as Seto-sama told me, I'll become someone who is needed)

Having reached that conclusion, Seina started running toward the dormitory. And that's when he got caught up in Shiba-boar's regular patrol route.

× × ×

(Even though Elma-san told me to be careful…)

Fortunately, the herd of Shiba-boars was small, and Seina soon managed to escape and reach the dormitory.

The dormitory, just as Elma had said, was dominated by a heavy, oppressive atmosphere. And from the reactions of his classmates, Seina knew he was clearly at the center of that atmosphere.

“About what happened this time… we don't know what to say…”

His classmates' words were the kind of comfort one offers to relatives or family members.

“Thanks. I'm fine.”

“Oh… I see.”

His classmates passed by, looking somewhat relieved despite feeling a slight unease at Seina's composed expression and smile. Seina didn't even bother to see them off, hurrying straight back to his room.

“Ah, Seina-kun!”

In their room, Rajau sat with a dark expression, and beyond him, Kenneth and their friends filled the room, each wearing even darker expressions.

(It feels like a wake.) Seina tried to describe the scene, but unconsciously stopped himself because it brought back unpleasant memories from the past.

“Is everyone okay?”

As Seina approached, Kenneth and the others looked at him with swollen eyes, but as he got closer, their eyes changed from sadness to confusion, and then to irritation.

“You… why are you making that face?”

“Huh?”

“Miki-senpai is dead, so why are you smiling like that?”

“Smiling??” Seina looked at Kenneth, bewildered.

His tone was gentle, but his eyes clearly held anger.

“…Is the misfortune of someone close to you dying just another day in the life for you?”

“Kenneth-kun!”

“…Sorry.”

Kenneth had lashed out at Seina in frustration, but Rajau's words seemed to restore some calm, and he apologized in a small voice.

“But Seina-kun… your expression is a bit painful for us right now.”

Seeing Seina's puzzled expression, Rajau continued.

“Hey, Seina-kun, how did you feel when you heard about Miki-senpai?”

“Huh?”

“Were you like this? Didn't you feel sad or anything?” His eyes held a hint of desperation.

Realizing the meaning behind Rajau's words, Seina recalled the moment he heard the news about Miki.

“…When I first heard about Miki-san, I didn't really understand what was so sad about it. To be honest, I still don't understand that… The thing that made me cry was when I thought about Miki-senpai's father.”

“I see… Seina-kun, you must have an unusually high tolerance for your own misfortune.” Rajau sighed deeply.

Seina wasn't smiling; he simply wore his usual expression. In this abnormal situation, he was simply putting on the same air of normalcy in this extraordinary situation.

“Seina! So you don't feel any regret or anything? Don't you want to find the bastards who attacked Miki-senpai and get revenge?” Kenneth stood up and shouted, his voice choked with tears.

“That's right! Seina knows Airi-sama too. If we talk to her, she might be able to help us out!”

“Seina even has connections with The Demon Princess of Jurai. Why don't we get an Imperial Ship or whatever and go there right now?”

His friends began chiming in as well. This was likely the conclusion they'd reached before Seina arrived. Their momentum resembled a volcano ready to erupt at any moment.

“……”

But Seina felt a little irritated by their words, because their opinions were irresponsible and dependent on what they themselves felt comfortable with.

What the boys were planning was nothing but reckless and ill-conceived. They didn't even know the details of the attack on Miki, let alone the location of the relay station ship she was aboard.

(Under these circumstances, Seto-sama isn't that lenient to lend us a top-secret “Imperial Ship”.)

It would be difficult enough just to get to the scene. For a group of inexperienced boys to go there alone and solve the case? That would be nothing short of a miracle. The GP's very existence would be rendered meaningless.

(Besides… the biggest problem is that I'm there…)

If Seina went into space with them, who knew what might happen. And neither Seina nor any of the boys present had the means to handle it. Someone who needed others to protect them, let alone solve the case, were nothing but a hindrance.

Of course, the boys' passion was precious. But Seina knew all too well the danger of letting them charge ahead recklessly. For Seina, misfortune was something that repeated itself. Rather than lamenting that misfortune, figuring out how to deal with the next one that was bound to come, and mastering that skill, was what mattered most to Seina.

“……”

Contrary to their expectations, Seina remained silent. And just as they began to grow impatient, Seina said, “We were summoned to be told what we can do, right?”

“!”

To them, it was a statement bordering on despair.

Some people left with insulting remarks to Seina, some silently, and some with looks of relief. However, Kenneth, left behind, had a disgruntled look on his face.

“Everyone will understand once they calm down.” Rajau smiled warmly and placed a hand on Seina's shoulder.

“Sorry, Seina. I suppose you're right… but I can't just accept it so easily.” Kenneth muttering to himself, turning his back on Seina and Rajau.

“All first-year students awaiting instructions at the dormitory, proceed to GP Academy.” The announcement came over the intercom.

“Let's go.” Rajau said, taking a deep breath of relief at being freed from the awkward situation.

“Hey, Rajau, do you agree with everyone else?” Seina called out to him, his eyes surprisingly cold.

“Huh?”

“Then we need to prepare properly. After that… we could ask Seto-sama.”

“……”

Rajau froze, rooted to the spot.

Rajau understood perfectly well that the idea of borrowing an Imperial Ship from Seto was absolutely impossible. He had only agreed to it because it felt good. Of course, the same was true for his classmates who had been there just moments before, it was mere momentum, with no concrete plan to actually get there. As time passed and their heads cooled, no one would seriously consider traversing that distant path to defeat Miki's enemy.

“If Seina goes, I'll go too.”

That was the extent of the boys' thinking.

They'd let passion carry them, go consult Seto, get turned down, and then just vent their frustration at the incompetent higher-ups until they felt satisfied. They just wanted closure for their own feelings.

Seina saw right through that. Even so, if his friends wished it, he was saying he'd gather all the information he could and present a proposal that might convince Seto, even just a little.

“……If everyone calms down, I think they'll realize how reckless this is.”

Rajau, feeling something akin to terror at Seina's different mindset, approached Kenneth, who was still sitting slumped, as if fleeing.

“Come on, let's go. Can you stand?” Rajau helped Kenneth to his feet, then let out a heavy sigh.

(I consider myself pretty mentally tough, you know… But this is what it means for someone like Seina-kun, with such a biased probablility, to survive.) Rajau sighed heavily once more as he looked back and forth between Kenneth and Seina.

The first-year students who gathered at GP Academy were not gathered in one place, but rather were given explanations of the situation from terminals in their individual spaces.

——What do you think, and what do you want to do?

This was the question posed to everyone after the incident briefing concluded. And it was this question that kicked off the choice-based adventure game.

The choices you made suggested the possibilities ahead. Sometimes, those possibilities numbered in the thousands. Of course, if you asked questions, the Academy would provide information within the limits of what they could share. Students were also free to gather information from accessible locations along their own unique routes. They combined this information to see how far they could go. However, they were strictly prohibited from discussing with other students, as such discussions could be influenced by others' opinions.

The students who stood up within the first few minutes were those who had decided to leave GP Academy.

Next up were those who would be undergoing psychological counseling in order to remain at GP Academy.

Next were those who went home.

The last ones remaining were those who intended to take some kind of action regarding Miki.

Seina rose from his seat with the group going home. While he had a desire to test his own limits, something else weighed more heavily on his mind.

Glancing briefly at Kenneth and Rajau's space, still shrouded by the Secret Wall, Seina quickly left the area.

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Kiriko, who had accompanied Mikami and watched Seina and the others on the monitors in the principal's control room, let out a small sigh of relief.

“Looks like he intends to stay in GP for now.” Amane said up, her expression mirroring Kiriko's relief.

“So, I guess that means I'm starting to get a little greedy?”

“Yeah.”

“So, what should we do?”

“Let's leave him alone for a while. By the way, Amane, how are the other students doing?” Kiriko asked calmly, glancing at Mikami.

“So far, it's within our expectations. There are very few students dropping out… and the students taking the simulations are working pretty hard.”

“…Indeed, it's the perfect situation for the aptitude test.” Kiriko said, biting her lip.

(Oh dear. Considering the future, it would have been better if she was worried about Seina-kun and just ran off without thinking…) Mikami, who had been watching her, smiled slightly, looking a bit perplexed.

“Masaki-sensei, Kaunaq-sensei. The situation has calmed down, so you may return to your duties now.” She said, turning her back on the two of them.

“Huh? But…”

“It's a little early, but let's have lunch. Let's go.”

Amane forcibly dragged Kiriko out of the principal's office. Kiriko, who had been letting Amane lead her along, roughly shook off her hand the moment they stepped outside.

“What do you think you're doing?”

“She was just being thoughtful. About Seina.”

“Huh!?” Kiriko blushed at Amane's words.

Even though she had been speaking to Mikami, Amane could read her expression so easily.

“But we're at work right now. Mixing business with pleasure is…”

“Worrying about students is part of the job, right? The other two who were affected, the kids who were close to him, they're getting assigned their own counselors too.”

“Well… that's true, but…”

“Hm?”

Amane noticed from Kiriko's expression that she wasn't just hesitating about personal actions during work hours.

“You seem a bit scared to meet Seina… is there something wrong?”

But Kiriko didn't answer Amane's question. Instead, she started walking away as if escaping. Amane didn't press further, and followed after Kiriko.

Elma arrived at the small spacecraft owned by Airi, where the Chairman's office was located, and immediately headed for her office.

Secretarial duties varied, ranging from attending to Airi's personal needs, handling emails and communications, receiving guests, managing schedules, to creating and managing documents. Moreover, including those in the philosophical sciences, the number of individuals called secretaries, counting down to the lowest ranks, reached into the thousands. Those who had offices on Airi's spaceship, where the Chairman's office was located, were special among secretaries.

Elma's position, however, was closer to that of a clerk. Her office was located in the mansion-style residential section at the rear of the spacecraft; she had lived here before moving in with Seina and the girls. The roughly thirty-tatami-mat studio contained only a work desk, a bed, and a slightly larger dining table. Despite the high-performance compressed storage units on the walls, there was no clutter suggesting a lived-in atmosphere.

Elma sat down at her work desk, immediately booted up her monitor, and quickly scanned her emails.

“No call from Airi-sama… huh?” She muttered.

She used Airi's secretarial privileges and began accessing the GP's highly secretive areas. A few minutes later…

BAM!

When Elma found out the truth of the incident, she couldn't contain her anger and slammed her fist on her desk.

“How could they…”

Gritting her teeth, Elma was deep in thought when Airi's call notification appeared on her monitor.

“Airi-sama!?… SOS!?”

It was an emergency call from Airi. Elma jumped to her feet, nearly knocking over her chair, and quickly ran out of the room.

“I knew Miki-san's father wouldn't be here.”

It was the site of the underground lab where Seina had previously been abducted and was about to be experimented on. Miki's father, Hiroshi, who was usually there to help with the cleanup, was nowhere to be seen, so Seina immediately ran off in another direction.

“It's definitely that place.”

From the start, Seina was certain Hiroshi was at the place he was heading. Going to the underground lab first had merely been a precaution. Seina headed for the nearest cobblestone promenade.

“Right, left…”

Moving exactly as Miki had instructed, he circled around twice, then headed toward the center from the three o'clock direction. He placed his hand on the stone pillar at the transfer point, then slowly advanced, keeping his hand pressed against the side wall of the dark passageway at the next transfer point.

(It's really dark in here… Last time I came… Whoa!) Just as he thought that, the sensation of rock beneath his hand abruptly vanished.

Regaining his balance, Seina looked around. The area was still shrouded in darkness, the sky above dimly lit, stars twinkling across the entire sky. At that moment, Seina remembered the roughly six-hour time difference between the Academy and this location.

“Right, it's still night here.”

Seina nodded and proceeded cautiously down the passageway, keeping his hand on the rock wall. Around the corner was a pavilion with a light on, just as he had expected.

Seina felt a sense of relief, like finding a lost child, but his steps became heavy and slow.

“How could I just wander in here like this… What on earth do I say?”

He couldn't imagine what to say to a father who had lost his daughter. In fact, he was terrified at the thought of coming into contact with the deep grief of Miki's father, who was sure to be there. Still, he steeled herself against the urge to turn back and headed toward the pavallion.

—Hey, Seina-kun. Could you please take care of my father?

Miki's request motivated Seina. Step by step, feeling as if he was walking on thin ice, Seina finally entered the pavallion and began to climb the stairs to the upper floor. However, at that moment, Seina noticed the presence of several people upstairs.

(?…Kiriko-san?) Seina quietly peeked up and saw a familiar face, so he quickly pulled back.

(No, it's not Kiriko-san… That's Aunt Tsukiko! But why is Aunt Tsukiko at the Academy?)

The person upstairs was Tsukiko, Hiroshi’s friend and Kiriko’s mother. Amidst Seina's confusion, he heard the voices of the two speaking.

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“This place hasn't changed a bit. How nostalgic.” Tsukiko sat by the window, staring blankly out at the moonlit scene beyond.

Hiroshi sat on the stone bench, his head bowed. “…How did you find this place?”

“Have you forgetten? I was the one who told you about this place.”

“…That's right. The three of us often came here together.”

“When was the last time we came here? I think it was back when Kiriko was still…”

“When Kiriko-chan was still a baby. But she really looks just like you, you know. It's amazing.” Hiroshi finally looked up at Tsukiko and began to speak.

“Are you saying I've aged?”

“No, you've become much more attractive than you were back then.”

“Hmm… Well, time has certainly passed. You've even gotten to the point where you can flatter me to my face.”

“It's not flattery. I've just gotten a little more involved in society than I used to be… But if we could have talked like this back then… No, the result would have been the same.”

“Heh heh. You still wrap things up neatly all by yourself, you haven't changed at all.”

“…You came here… You know, right? What I did…” The peaceful conversation abruptly shifted as Hiroshi lowered his voice and began speaking in a low, almost groaning tone. “I'm sorry… I'm… such a pathetic man! I should have…”

“Don't misunderstand me.” Tsukiko didn't yell, but she interrupted Hiroshi in a firm voice. “I came here… to comfort a friend who lost his daughter.”

“!!”

Tsukiko's words were unexpected for Hiroshi. Yet they were also the most joyful and most disappointing thing he heard. For a moment, a gentle silence dominated the scene.

“……I… I…” Hiroshi's voice broke into tears, and any further words were drowned out by sobs, inaudible to Seina.

(So Aunt Tsukiko and Miki-senpai's father were friends…)

Feeling he shouldn't hear any more, Seina quietly slipped away. Once outside, released from his tension, he took a deep breath and looked up at the pavallion.

(I was shocked, but I'm glad Aunt Tsukiko came… Oh!)

At that moment, Seina gasped at the sight of the sun rising from the mountains, illuminating the lake.

Part of the Kuruuru that had completely covered the lake had vanished, revealing the water's surface shimmering a marine blue. The crystal-clear water and the white sand at the lake bottom created that color.

—The Kuruuru flowers will be at their peak for about another month. Once they finish blooming, the grass above the water will wither and disappear almost entirely… And then, well, that's something to look forward to when the time comes.

Recalling Miki's words, Seina gazed at the scene, utterly captivated.

“…It's beautiful.”

If the Kuruuru completely disappeared, he would likely see an even more breathtaking view.

“So this is what Miki-senpai wanted to show me…”

Just then, as Seina gazed at the scenery, he noticed movement in the corner of his eye. It was a figure crossing the bridge spanning the pavilion next door.

“…No… It can't be!?”

Seina's eyes widened in shock at the sight of that figure, even more than when he had seen Tsukiko.

Tsukiko looked down at Hiroshi, who had buried his face in her lap and was crying like a child, patiently waiting for him to stop.

Eventually, he pulled away from her and sat down, turning his back shyly. Tsukiko roughly draped a towel over Hiroshi's head, straightened his rumpled hem, and sat down a little distance away.

“At first, it really was just a little game.” His face still covered by the towel, Hiroshi began speaking with his back to her.

“Looking at newborn Kiriko-chan, I thought… what if… between you and me…”

“Hmm hmm. So, in this scenario, is Miki-chan my child with you?” Tsukiko spoke in a cheerful tone to make it easier for Hiroshi to talk.

“No, that's not it. I started by building your personal data profile first… Ah! No, of course, I didn't get your data illegally! I gathered things like medical records and the external dimensions from your GP record, and then…”

“Then it was Hiroshi-kun's subjective input, I suppose?”

“I asked others for their input too, tried to be as objective as possible, went through trial and error over and over… I just got so caught up in building it because it was fun watching that persona's reactions become more and more like yours every day.”

“Hehe, that's so typical of you, Hiroshi-kun, getting sidetracked like that.”

“Hahaha…” Hiroshi chuckled, took a deep breath, and began speaking again. “Then one day,

that AI started talking about things it couldn't possibly have been taught. Things with no record anywhere, things unimaginable based on its past data. I frantically investigated everything, and that's when I discovered the AI had developed an Astral."

"Memory feedback from the Astral Sea, huh… That's incredible. For such an event to occur with an AI program lacking a base, it's worthy of the Academy Grand Prize!"

"But I was terrified! I thought I'd done something terrible. Sure, I really wanted to announce that AI. But if I did, and it came out that I'd built it based on your personal data without permission… I even considered destroying it."

"Even if you call it my personal data, it's just based on your subjective information, Hiroshi-kun. You could have just covered it up somehow… You're so clumsy."

"Even if you can fool the others…" Hiroshi glanced at Tsukiko. "I wanted to be …… good friends with you and him."

"…But you couldn't bring yourself to destroy the data either."

Hiroshi nodded slightly at Tsukiko's words.

"Destroying an AI with an Astral felt like killing you… But what was even more ironic was that she and I, the one who created her, could never be together."

An AI possessing an Astral is granted human rights. However, marriage between its creator and the AI is not permitted. That restriction would be lifted only after the AI became an independent individual and roughly a century had passed. Yet, seeing an AI—like a lover into whom you poured your heart and soul—leave your grasp, and worse, unite with someone else, would be profoundly painful.

"And then?"

"Well, the original concept was based on the idea of having children with you. There was a chance the Astral might vanish… but no, I actually hoped that might happen. That's why I erased her memories. But…"

"The Astral didn't disappear, did it?"

"Yeah. After erasing her memories, she was like an innocent baby. I gave her a body and raised her like any normal child. But for me, it was nothing more than atonement… And yet!"

"… I see." Tsukiko stared at Hiroshi, who hung his head in silence, hesitating whether to tell him the truth. Because it was both a great hope and a great disappointment.

(But… the guilt over building her using my personal data without permission, and erasing her memories to make her pure… It seems that was a blessing for Hiroshi-kun. Miki-san is no longer someone he needs to bind… She became like a true daughter. Then…) Having made up her mind, Tsukiko quickly stood up and stood in front of Hiroshi.

“Hey Hiroshi-kun, this is a really slim possibility, but…”

(No way!?)

Seina ran towards the figure crossing the bridge that led to the neighboring pavallion. His bio-enhanced strength caused him to fall over and over again, exceeding the limits of friction between the soles of his shoes and the ground, but he kept his eyes fixed on the figure.

“Who?”

The figure sensed Seina's unusual presence and turned around warily.

“Se-Seina-chan!?”

The figure - a woman - said this with her eyes widened in shock.

“It really is you!”

When Seina was a child, it was only for less than a year, but he would never forget the sight… Standing before him was Tenchi's mother, Kiyone.

“…Auntie Kiyone”

Tenchi was crying on the day his mother died - thinking back, that memory was Seina’s biggest trauma. It was the first time he had ever witnessed death. Especially since it came from people close to him, people who had accepted him.

(She was alive)

For Seina, who was still in shock over what had happened to Miki, there was no way to resist the joy of having something he had lost returned. When Seina saw her face, tears began to flow from his eyes. Then, he collapsed to the ground, powerless, and began to cry like a small child.

“Hey, Seina-chan!” She crouched down in front of Seina, looking confused.

“…Auntie…” Seina clung to her, trying to make sure it wasn't a dream.

“… This is… Just like what happened with Tenchi. But…Seina-chan has been through a lot too.” She muttered, her expression looking somehow happy.

She embraced Seina with both arms, pressing his head against her chest, and began to stroke his short-cropped head with a look of pleasure on her face.

“Ahhh, this feeling. It's a little harder than before, but it still feels good. Lol…huh? Wait a sec… if it's the same pattern as with Tenchi…”

Suddenly she looked up and began to look around, noticing a man a short distance away

looking at her curiously.

“…What are you doing?”

As the man whispered to her, she put her index finger over her mouth, then made a gesture as if to shoo him away. The man quietly returned to the shore and hid behind a large rock. Seeing this, she smile and began to stroke Seina's head again.

About ten minutes later, Seina regained his composure and realized that his face was pressed against her plump breasts, and he began to squirm uncomfortably.

“Have you calmed down?”

“Y-yes.”

“Yes, that's good.” But she made no attempt to loosen her grip on Seina's head.

“…Um, so, could you let go now…”

“Whaaa? It's been a while since we last met, so I kinda want to hold Seina-chan a little longer.” With that, she tightened her grip even more.

(Guess I'll just have to wait until Auntie's satisfied… But)

Seina was no longer a little child. The feeling of her chest pressed against him was incredibly stimulating. Seina tried to shake off the feeling and tried to remember what it was like when he was a child.

(I remembered her face clearly from photos, but did her voice sound like this?)

It was a rather strange sensation. The tone of her voice reminded him of Airi, while the calmness of it resembled Minaho's. Yet the feeling and scent when hugged lingered faintly in his memory.

(That was… like when I first got Tenchi-senpai and Kai involved and got injured…)

Fortunately, Tenchi and Kai had trained well, so they were tougher and more durable than the other kids in town. They wouldn't be seriously injured by a small incident. However, it was true that Seina had hurt them, even if it was only a scratch.

(Their parents will definitely hate me… Just like my other friends, they'll tell me not to play with them anymore… Thinking that, I tried to go home alone.)

Just as the western sky began to turn red, Kiyone came searching for Seina, who was trudging home alone along the mountain path, fighting back tears. Kiriko was with her.

——It's okay, I don't hate you.

(She said that and hugged me like she is, didn't she?)

Kiyone loved her son Tenchi and Seina equally. She scolded them properly and played

pranks on them too.

(I remember someone even scribbled on my forehead while I was in the hospital… but… what?)

As Seina recalled various things from the past, a sense of unease began to creep in. It was the behavior of the relatives she had seen at Kiyone's funeral.

Tenchi's father, the Masaki family, and of course Kiriko and the others were all grieving Kiyone's death. Even young Seina could feel it acutely.

Masaki Village had a special custom: the way people participated in funerals changed depending on who had passed away. In Kiyone's case, only her husband and children could attend the wake. Among the villages' women, only those very close were permitted. Even Rea, who had been like a sister to Kiyone, wasn't allowed to participate directly. She was only permitted to stay at the Masaki house, the funeral venue, to do menial work behind the scenes. Kai, unable to attend the wake, was looked after by Seina's mother.

——The atmosphere of grief among Kiriko and the villagers was frightening.

While Tsukiko and Kiriko attended the wake, Seina trembled under his futon. Barely sleeping, he was carried by Tsukiko the next morning to the funeral.

(I can't believe that was a lie… that it was all an act. And why would Aunt Kiyone be at the Academy, after putting on such a show?)

By chance, a man hiding behind a rock answered Seina's question.

"Hey, Tennyo-san… Tennyo-san?" The man timidly called out.

"Shut up! I'm in the middle of something important!" Kiyone, speaking with irritation, gripped Seina's head firmly to keep him from turning away.

"But Tsukiko-san is…"

From the pavilion next door, where the man pointed, Tsukiko was just emerging with Hiroshi.

"Huh? Oh no. You! Go!"

"Me? …Alright."

The man ran off, his footsteps making a sound that, even by flattering standards, couldn't be called light—it was clear just from the sound that he wasn't good at exercise.

"Ugh… Alright then."

Once the man was out of sight, Kiyone released Seina's head from her embrace.

"…Who is Tennyo?"

“Huh? Umm…” Kiyone slowly looked away from Seina, who was staring at her suspiciously, and scratched her head with a confused expression.

“…Hey, this isn't the right place to be, so let's go into the pavallion and talk, Seina-chan.” She said as if resigned. Then stood up straight.

“I was sure he was over there.” Amane gazed out the window of their office at the half-destroyed grounds where the underground lab had been.

“Seina's footprints were there, so maybe we just missed him? What about the tracking satellite data?”

“…He seems to be about ten thousand kilometers away… but no way, this is ……”

“Ten thousand kilometers?”

Amane was momentarily stunned by the distance, but immediately grasped a possibility. “Judging from Seina's past actions, if he could travel that far… Could it be… the place he went on that date with Miki-san?”

“Probably.”

“So, it really is her secret place, huh?”

“A special place passed down from her senior. A secret hideaway.” Kiriko said wistfully.

“How nostalgic… If that's the case, we can't go there, can we?”

“Yeah… I guess not.” Kiriko murmured with a sigh of relief.

“Hey, Kiriko. Could it be you know about that place? …Come to think of it, since your mother and that girl's father knew each other, it's possible, right?”

Kiriko remained silent at Amane's question, but her expression made it clear Amane's guess was correct.

“If someone told you about that place, wouldn't it be okay to go? Or is there a reason you don't want to?” Amane voiced the question she'd been pondering since the principal's office.

“!!”

Kiriko hesitated for a moment, then collapsed into a chair with a small sigh.

“……When Seina-chan was still little. Yes, it was less than a year after we met. The lady of the main house passed away.” She began speaking slowly, as if savoring each word. Recalling that event was painful, but she also didn't have the confidence to handle Seina's current situation alone.

“The main house? The Masaki family?”

“Tenchi-chan's mother… Airi-sama's second daughter, Kiyone-sama.”

“Oh, I've heard about her a few times. Apparently she was just as wild as Airi-sama. But I see… she passed away. Tenchi-kun doesn't live with his father, so I didn't know.”

“At that time, the only children around Seina-chan's age in the village were Kai and Tenchi-chan, so the three of them would always play together. Kiyone-sama treated Seina-chan like her real son.”

“That was Seina's first experience losing someone close to him.”

“Yes. Seina-chan was so little at the time that he doesn't really remember what the situation was like, but… it was scary.” Kiriko remembered this and clenched her fists, her shoulders shaking.

“He thought it might have been his fault that Kiyone-sama died. He sat huddled in the corner of our living room, his face pale as death, trembling so badly I feared he might collapse from shock at any moment… I was just a child myself, so I didn't know what to do…” At that point, Kiriko stiffened and fell silent.

“So? What happened?” Amane gently urged the silent Kiriko on, her tone sisterly.

“…My mother picked him up and took him to the funeral home. There, Tenchi-chan was so worried about him… He petted Seina-chan. Seina-chan clung to Tenchi-chan for the rest of the day.”

“Then?”

“From the next day on, Tenchi-chan came to my house every day to invite Seina-chan to play… Usually, Seina-chan and Kai would go to Tenchi-chan's house. But I guess going to the Masaki house and realizing Kiyone-sama wasn't there scared them. Of course, Tenchi-chan must have been lonely too.”

“Hmmmm. Even Tenchi-kun was just a little kid. It's no wonder he's in charge of those troublesome women.”

“Well… it's not quite that simple…”

During the wake, Tenchi went missing and was found, along with Kiyone's umbrella, at the shrine where Ryoko was sealed. His compassion for Seina was also the flip side of his dependence on her.

“So… in the end, Kiriko couldn't do anything.” Amane deliberately cracked a joke in her usual tone.

Perhaps venting her anxiety had lightened Kiriko's mood a little.

“That's right!” She retorted in her usual tone.

“Heh heh, there's no magic cure for this sort of thing anyway. Isn't just being there for him enough? …Besides, Seina isn't a little kid anymore, right?” Amane approached Kiriko and suddenly jabbed her ample chest.

“Kya!”

“Hehe, why don't you just go ahead and huuug him with those big breasts?”

“I'm talking seriously here! Stop joking around… Ah!”

Kiriko stood up and yelled, while Amane, who had been laughing it off, suddenly noticed something and exchanged glances with her.

“…Hey, Kiriko, you mentioned someone who'd totally pull that kind of prank, right?”

“Yeah. And they'd seize the moment, ignoring the other person's feelings and the atmosphere completely.”

In their minds, they pictured Airi, looking delightfully happy, doing something inappropriate to Seina. But Amane immediately leaned back against the desk, looking relieved.

“Well, as long as Seina's in the secret place, we should be fine. Even Airi-sama would probably respect that rule.”

“…You know?” But Kiriko muttered, her face ashen.

“Huh?”

“Airi-sama knows about that place! Because the one who told me about it was Minaho-sama .”

And it was Airi who told Minaho about that place.

“Then why the hell are you just standing around like that?! Come on, move it!” Amane, her expression changing, stood up as if urging Kiriko on.

But Kiriko looked at Amane with a confused expression.

“Huh? What about you, Amane?”

“Well, I can't exactly go there myself, can I?”

“But…”

Dealing with Airi alone was one thing, but Seina was also there. Kiriko still couldn't bring herself to face Seina.

“Yes! I can show you the place!”

“Huh?”

“Then Amane can go there too!” Kiriko said cheerfully, grabbed Amane's hand, and forcibly dragged her outside.

SHIN TENCHI MUYO! RYO-OHKI GAIDEN
真・天地無用! 魎皇鬼外伝
天地無用! GXP 5
TENCHI MUYO! GXP 5
“...Tenchi-senpai's older sister?”
The differences between Tennyo and Kiyone, as far as could be seen through old photos and vague memories, was their hairstyle alone. They were the same in every other way.

“…Tenchi-senpai's oder sister?”

On the second floor of another pavallion, Seina stared blankly at Tennyo's face. Judging from his vague memories and old photos, the only difference between Tennyo and Kiyone was their hairstyle. Other than that, she was like a mirror image of Kiyone.

“Yes, my real name is Masaki Tennyo. But this isn't our first meeting, is it?”

“Huh?”

“I look just like my mother, don't I? So sometimes, I'd switch places with her and take care of Tenchi. Of course, Seina-chan and Kai-kun too… I played with you, even bathed you.”

“…I never noticed. But why would you do that?”

“You see, I'm eighty years old this year.”

“Huh!?… Oh, but right, that makes sense here.”

Age at the Academy felt completely different from Earth's sense of time. Seina remembered hearing before that he could live for about two thousand years.

“Many Earth people who knew me are still alive and well. My work here was going smoothly too. I didn't feel the need to disguise myself to look my age and return to Earth. But I desperately wanted to see my brother Tenchi, so I took the quickest route—using my mother's exact likeness to switch places with her. But…”

“Auntie passed away, so you couldn't go back to Earth?”

“Yeah, it was all so sudden… If I hadn't been so reluctant and had just let Tenchi and Seina-chan recognize me as the person I was on Earth, I probably could've gone back smoothly. But my resemblance to my mother ended up being a problem. Still, Tenchi had Rea-chan, and Seina-chan was there too.”

“I… I never did anything for Tenchi-senpai… I just caused trouble…”

“Just being there was enough. To Tenchi, Seina-chan is like a real little brother. Rea-chan said it was thanks to Seina-kun being there that Tenchi never felt lonely.” Tennyo gently placed her hand on Seina's head.

“Well, actually, the truth about who I really am—which I was supposed to reveal to Tenchi when he graduated high school—got out way too early because of Ryoko-san and the others. So I rushed over with his fiancee, Noike-chan, but…”

“No-Noike-san is Tenchi-senpai's fiancee!?”

“Seto-sama decided it.”

“…Oh, I see.”

“So, I went all out preparing surprises to shock Tenchi, but…” Tennyo was laughing mischievously as she spoke, but suddenly her mouth clenched in a frown.

“My idiot dad got carried away and ruined all my carefully laid plans… He's such a pain. I really don't get what Rea-chan sees in him, thinking she could marry someone like that.” She spat out.

“Uncle doesn't seem like the type who could pull off a serious act like that, does he? Wait, but Uncle lives in Kurashiki, right? He's from Earth, isn't he?”

“Are you trying to say Tenchi and I are half-alien?”

At Tennyo's question, Seina silently nodded.

“Well, my dad is also a Masaki. I think he's over 120 this year.”

“What?!”

“My father is unusual for a Masaki; he has never been to space. Everyone who lives in Masaki Village, except for the children who don't know their true identities, is a person who returned to Earth because they love it. Most of them work in agriculture or as GP representatives, and have jobs that have nothing to do with Earth… but my father is the only one who has a job on Earth.”

“120 years… How did he manage to keep it from everyone around him?”

“Masaki Village only has members of the family living there, and villages like that are geographically isolated too. Back then, communication technology was primitive, so most people didn't know anything about villages outside their own. Plus, the chaos of World War II helped cover it up. But we'll have to be more careful from now on… Hmm?”

Tennyo noticed Seina's expression suddenly cloud over.

“What's wrong?”

“Auntie Kiyone…I guess she's dead after all.”

Watching Tennyo, who resembled Kiyone not only in appearance but also in aura and tone of voice, brought back vivid memories of Kiyone that had been hazy before.

“I see… I'm sorry for misleading you.”

“Not at all! …It was just my own misunderstanding…”

“You were happy for Tenchi, weren't you? Thank you. But you know, I'm truly happy to see Seina-chan. Because I thought I'd never see you again in this form.” With that, Tennyo hugged Seina tightly once more.

“To me too, Seina-chan is just as important a little brother as Tenchi is… Ah!!”

Suddenly, Tennyo pulled away, taking Seina by the shoulders. Now with a stern expression, she brought her face close to Seina's.

“…Just so there's no misunderstanding, back in the day, all those weird pranks played on Seina-chan? That was all Mom's doing!”

“Huh? …You mean like when she drew on my forehead while I was in the hospital?”

“Yes! And scribbling in Tenchi's picture books too.”

“Ah, you mean that… I did think it was weird. Tenchi-senpai wasn't really the type to play pranks like that. I just assumed it was Uncle's doing… But I never imagined the culprit was Auntie… The light is darkest under the lamp.”

“She really was a handful, wasn't she? Mom’s got that side just like Grandma… Airi-sama. Whenever Mom did something and got scolded, it was always me who took the blame… You know? Back when Mom was still in space, she was just as wild as Airi-sama. When I went into space and came to the Academy, people would see my face and run away. Every single person I met would go on and on about Mom's exploits. I was mortified.”

“That… must have been awful.”

“But thanks to that, I was able to come to space and meet a lot of different people. How about you, Seina-chan?”

“…I also met many people after coming to space. Come to think of it, because I was always getting tangled up with Airi-san, all sorts of people started talking to me…”

Mitoto and Onnainin, Seto, Minaho, Hakuren, Airi, Amane, Elma, Kiriko. Of course, pirates and Seiryo—people he didn’t get along with—and then Miki and Hiroshi.

“…But because of me… finally—”

“Enough! How many possibilities have you squandered like this, Seina-chan?” Tennyo roughly pulled Seina close and glared at him.

“!”

It was the same face Kiyone made when she was truly angry, the one she showed when Tenchi or Seina did something dangerous, a face Seina remembered very well.

“You know what? Once I've grabbed this hand, I'm never letting go. No matter what happens!”

It meant she wanted Seina to stay here. No matter what calamity might befall him. And those were the very words Seina most needed to hear.

Seto's words, acknowledging Seina's bad luck as “necessary”, were welcome to him. But they also meant that results were required—results like capturing pirates and criminals. And to achieve those results, he needed to draw calamity to himself. Above all, what terrified Seina was that drawing calamity would inevitably involve others. Miki's incident was the embodiment of that fear. That's why he was so happy to be told he was wanted here, regardless of his bad luck.

“I'm… allowed to stay here, right?”

“Yes.” In response to Seina's pleading question, Tennyo smiled brightly, just like the old Kiyone.

“I'll… do my best.” Seina replied, looking like he was about to burst into tears.

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There were people watching Seina and Tennyo from the Juraian mansion on the opposite bank.

“Seto-sama, stop this disgraceful behavior! And you lot, don't join Seto-sama in making such a spectacle of yourselves!” Minaho yelled at Seto, Hakuren and the other three, who were kneeling on a bench by the window and peering through binoculars like children looking out the window of a train, with an exasperated look on her face.

“If Airi-chan hadn't resisted so much, we would have made it in time. It's all her fault we have to spy in such a ridiculous state!” Seto shot a displeased glance at Airi, who was curled up in a ball in the corner of the room.

Just then, the sound of multiple footsteps approached from the back.

“Oh, it seems we have guests.”

At Seto's voice, Hakuren and the others stopped peeking and stood up to greet the visitors. The next instant, Kiriko, Amane, and Elma burst into the room.

“Minaho-sama?… You ladies?” Kiriko stared dumbstruck.

Minaho flashed an embarrassed smile, while Hakuren and the others bowed respectfully.

“So, this is a Juraian facility? …But why is Elma here too?”

“Wow, I followed Airi-sama's instructions and arrived here…”

“You're late, aren't you?” Seto said with a sullen expression as she lowered her binoculars, turned toward Kiriko and the others.

“Seto-sama!?”

Kiriko, Amane, and Elma finally noticed Seto's presence and quickly snapped to attention. Satisfied that her presence had been acknowledged, Seto resumed peering at the opposite shore through her binoculars.

“Hey Kiriko-chan.”

As Kiriko looked puzzled, Minaho pointed to Airi, who was lying on the floor.

Airi lay on the floor, rolled up like a sushi mat.

Seto looked displeased.

Minaho, smiling wryly.

(At least the worst-case scenario was avoided.)

Kiriko and Amane, having grasped the general situation from that scene, finally breathed a sigh of relief. But…

“What are you looking so smug about, after letting another woman snatch the best part?”

A few seconds after Seto's sarcastic remark, there were two more women by the window.

“Um… Minaho-sama. We understand why Airi-sama sent out an SOS call, but we're still not quite grasping this whole situation…”

Left alone, Elma glanced nervously at Airi, unsure whether to help.

“Waaah… waaah…”

Minaho and Elma—her daughter and her secretary. Airi appealed to the two who would surely rescue her from this unreasonable violence (?), her eyes glistening like a puppy's.

“Actually…”

Minaho turned her back on Airi, practically pulling Elma away, and began explaining what had happened. A few minutes later, the number of women pressed against the window increased by one. A total of eight women now stood in a line, staring across the river.

“Ugh, ugaaaah!”

Abandoned by both her daughter and her secretary, Airi began writhing like a struggling caterpillar, flailing her body in a last-ditch effort to escape. But her struggles were futile; Seto and the others remained focused on the scene across the river.

“…Hey Kiriko…who is that?” Amane asked, still peering through her binoculars.

As if interested in the question, Elma and Hakuren lowered their binoculars and looked at Kiriko.

“Tennyo-san… She's Tenchi-kun's older sister.”

“Does he even have a sister? …I'm pretty sure Mihoshi said he was an only child?”

Kiriko fell silent at Amane's question, offering no answer. It was Seto who spoke instead.

“Tennyo-chan and Tenchi-chan have an age difference of over sixty years. Tenchi-chan only found out he had an older sister very recently.”

“I see… On Earth, biological siblings with a sixty-year age gap are practically unheard of. But why is she acting so close to Seina?”

“Actually, that girl looks just like her mother, Kiyone-chan… In fact, back in the day, she sometimes switched places with Kiyone-chan to look after Tenchi-chan and Seina-chan.”

Convinced by Seto's explanation, Elma and Hakuren resumed peering through their binoculars.

“I see… That's why Seina looks so happy.”

There was a hint of loneliness and jealousy in Amane's tone. The expression Seina was showing Tennyo was something he had never even shown to Kiriko, but it was the kind of emotion a child would show to their mother, not the kind he would show to Kiriko or Amane. To put it another way, there are some expressions that he might show to Kiriko or Amane, but never to Tennyo. But Amane felt a bit of loneliness, like when a puppy that had been playing around and suddenly spots its owner and runs off in that direction. And it wasn't just Amane who felt that way; everyone there shared the same sentiment.

(Heh) Minaho, watching this, smiled wryly.

Objectively speaking, from behind, Seto and the others clearly looked ridiculous. Yet not a single person tried to interrupt Seina and Tennyo.

(Usually, Seto-sama would lead the way, and then everyone would just barge in…)

The first to dash out, their gawker instincts fully exposed, would be Seto and Gyokuren. Then there were those burning with rivalry, those who were worried, those who would try to stop the foolishness, and those acting without thinking— but all of them are sincere and do not want to get in the way of Seina and Tennyo.

(Still, it must be tough for Kiriko-chan… Just like with Kiyone-chan before, she can only watch from afar this time too.)

Among those lined up gazing outside, a heavy sense of sorrow emanated particularly from Kiriko's back.

(But the real battle is yet to come. Seina-chan's heart hasn't healed yet. Hang in there, Kiriko-chan.)

Minaho cheered on Kiriko in her heart. Then grabbed her mother's leg, who was still struggling and making a lot of noise that ruined the mood, and roughly dragged her out of the room, not caring that her face was scraping against the floor.

Kenneth and Rajau, having finished the multiple-choice adventure test, sat on that floating island where they'd once eaten lunch with Miki and the others, gazing blankly down at the Academy.

“Hey… that test earlier, how far did you get, Rajau?”

“I couldn't get out of GP Academy in the end. How about you, Kenneth-kun?”

“……I got a week of detention in the dorm.”

“The others got similar results. You know? That test shows your ranking. None of us first-years managed to leave the Academy.”

“Even Seina's connections all turned us away at the gate.” Kenneth said with a frown, as he recalled that incident.

“So, that’s why you were put in detention?”

“No… I snuck in trying to see Seto-sama and got caught. I got three days of detention and tried to escape but failed.”

“So you tried to force your way in… I was questioned for about five minutes, but they politely refused me.”

“Can't be helped, huh. We haven't been taught any of the knowledge or skills needed for investigations yet.”

Hearing Kenneth's words, Rajau's frowned.

“Hey, Kenneth-kun. This morning, I asked Seina-kun… If we had managed to get to the scene where Miki-senpai and the others were attacked… What could we have done?”

“Well… just watch, I guess?” Kenneth sighed, acknowledging the truth he didn't want to face.

“I thought maybe I could accomplish something if I went there… No, that's not true. I was just convincing myself of this and drowning out my sadness and frustration.”

The test they had just completed revealed all of those problems, and of course it also provided an indication of what they needed to learn going forward.

“Seina-kun, you've been carrying this unfair burden of probability bias all this time, haven't you?”

“…I feel bad about it. I went too far.”

“Me too. So let's say those words to him directly.” With that, Rajau stood up abruptly.

“Yeah… More importantly, I'm starving.”

“Speaking of which, it seems like the meal management program starts tomorrow.”

“What!? So today's the last day we can eat whatever we want until we're stuffed?”

“Well, most of what Kenneth-kun has been eating so far is within the program's limits anyway.”

“Most, not all! Let's go, Rajau! Today we're buying everyone's favorite foods and having a party!”

Kenneth rose to his feet with just as much vigor as Rajau and began running toward the transport port.

## Chapter Two: Hope and Peace

Hiroshi was brought to one of the tens of thousands of Airi workshops by Tsukiko. It was an advanced research facility that even Hiroshi, who held a PhD from the Academy, had never seen before. However, even in his amazement, he immediately recognized something important.

“…What is this?”

It was NB, transformed into a female form, that had been brought into the workshop.

“Seina-kun's NB.”

“Seina-kun's? …No way, Miki!?”

Hiroshi ran up to NB and stared at it intently. It was like a roughly carved sculpture, not enough to identify anyone, but Hiroshi sensed Miki's presence in it.

“I'll let him explain that.”

The man who had been with Tennyo earlier came running down the aisle behind Tsukiko, wearing a dust-proof laboratory suit.

“Sorry, I'm late.” The man with the scruffy beard said, happily shaking Hiroshi's hand.

“Nice to meet you. My name is Masaki Hakuryo. I'm really thrilled to meet the creator of

Astral AI.”

“Uh, well… Well, it's not like I planned it out… it was just a coincidence…”

“It just shows how much love was involved.”

“Hakuryo-kun, we'll satisfy your intellectual curiosity later. For now, please explain NB.”

“Ah, sorry. Since I'm involved with AI too, I just…” Hakuryo stood before NB, scratching his head sheepishly.

“Um… As you can see, this NB is formed almost entirely from special biometal…”

“Impressive. In the AV I saw, I'm pretty sure…”

As Hiroshi tried to recall something, “Twelve meters and twenty-two centimeters,” Hakuryo answered without a moment's pause.

It was that giant AV android Kenneth had bought by blowing his entire savings.

“Huh! …So you saw it too?”

Exchanging meaningful glances, Hiroshi and Hakuryo smiled faintly.

—WHAM!

The next instant, Tsukiko's merciless iron fist sank into both their cheeks.

“…… Ehhhh? Allow me to continue my explanation.”

Hakuryo and Hiroshi backed away from Tsukiko, who stood arms crossed, glaring at them. They began whispering as if sharing a secret.

“As you know, this NB possesses transformation capabilities through biometal. The reason it took this form is due to the forced data transfer performed on it this morning…”

“Forced data transfer… Could it be?!”

“This is purely speculation, but Tarrant might have realized Miki-san was a Pinocchio, suspected it was a trap, and investigated.”

“So, to investigate, he copied Miki's character data. As a result, Miki's astral form inhabited the copy instead of the original?”

“Yes. She likely attempted to move it to NB via various locations from Tarrant’s ship's computer. Unfortunately, the data transfer itself failed.”

“Maybe the line got cut off?”

“That was probably the main reason, but there was also a negative reaction from NB.”

“A negative reaction? But character data isn't that large…”

A single person's character data wasn't that large in terms of capacity. It was hard to imagine an NB created in Airi's workshop lacking that much capacity.

“Actually, another Astral AI personality already resides within this NB.”

“What!?… Oh… So that's why Miki…” Hiroshi’s shoulders slumped in disappointment, but immediately, “But that means Miki is alive!”

He looked up, his eyes full of hope. Tsukiko, worried that Hiroshi would be disappointed, smiled with relief.

“Yes. The character data transfer failed, but it seems there is some information she left behind… But Hiroshi-kun, I hesitated to tell you this because…”

“Miki's survival is still uncertain, right? But at least there's hope. It's much better than just despair… Thank you, Tsukiko-san. I appreciate it.”

“Hiroshi-kun…”

“Don't worry! She's a strong girl, and she's smart… after all, she was modeled after you.”

“Hehe, I see. The reason I need your help is because the remaining data has been encrypted, and the keywords have been removed.” Tsukiko said, pointing to the study space she had prepared for Hiroshi.

“Also… The Astral AI in NB wants to talk to you, Hiroshi-kun.”

“Eh, with me?… Ah, okay.”

“You’ll be amazed when you get there. Hakuryo-kun, get ready. Come on, Hiroshi-kun, hurry up!”

Tsukiko roughly grabbed Hiroshi by the collar as he stood there, looking puzzled, and threw him into a nearby chair, forcing him to sit down.

Reuniting with Tennyo hadn't healed the emotional wounds from Miki's incident. What happened with Tennyo was like receiving medical treatment; now it was just a matter of waiting for the wound to slowly heal. But that didn't mean forgetting about Miki.

“…I'm going to become a GP, after all. I have to make sure I don't regret not being able to protect everyone when that time comes… Miki-senpai, I'll do my best.”

It wasn't about giving in to sorrow or fear, but overcoming it and moving forward. Returning to the dormitory, Seina swore this to himself with a different resolve than this morning.

“Seina!”

Kenneth and Rajau, spotting Seina, rushed over at full speed.

“Ah, Kenneth, Rajau…”

Seeing them, Seina bowed deeply.

“Sorry about this morning… I…”

“No, that was our fault. Let's just forget about it. More importantly, we need to hurry!”

Kenneth and Rajau, looking extremely flustered, suddenly started running while practically carrying Seina. But the next instant, they were caught up in the movement of a herd Shiba-boar bursting out of the forest.

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“Are you two okay?”

Despite being caught in the Shiba-boar's movement, Seina was completely unharmed. He peered down worriedly at Kenneth and Rajau, who were covered in Shiba-boar footprints and looked absolutely wrecked.

“We're fine! This is nothing compared to Clay Probe ink bullets!”

“Exactly!”

Kenneth and Rajau stood up with a jerk and shouted, their faces somehow looking pleased. They grabbed Seina again and sprinted toward the dorm building at incredible speed. Upon arriving at the dorm, they practically tossed Seina in front of the large bulletin board.

“Now look, Seina!”

“This is… Room assignments?”

Kenneth pointed to a notice on the bulletin board announcing changes to the room assignments for first-year students. The first-years’ rooms, marked in red, had been split into several different locations, unlike before.

“They suddenly decided to do restoration work on part of the dorm!”

“This dorm is quite old and has a long history, you see. It's designated as a historic site. They decided to do the repairs now that the second-years are gone for their practical training.”

“……”

Seina looked at Kenneth and Rajau, who seemed strangely excited, with a puzzled expression. He couldn't understand why they were so excited about this.

“Ha ha ha! That look says you don't get why we're so excited, huh? It's because of the location of our new rooms!” Kenneth pointed happily at a spot that stood apart from the other rooms like a little island.

“Ha ha ha! This is prime real estate! It's close to the cafeteria and the large public bath, and what's more…”

With that, Kenneth and Rajau scooped Seina up again and dashed toward the back of the building housing the bulletin board. Kenneth and Rajau were shouting so loudly that he hadn't noticed until then, but he could hear a lot of voices and noise coming from behind the building.

“Wh-what's going on?”

“You'll see when we get there!”

As soon as they reached the back of the building, Kenneth and Rajau roughly set Seina down, just like they had at the bulletin board.

All the first-years had gathered there, looking at something with excitement. But the crowd was too thick for Seina, Kenneth, and Rajau to see what it was.

“Seina, this way.”

Kenneth pulled Seina along and entered a gate marked ‘Authorized Personnel Only’ installed on the protective barrier.

“Kenneth, doesn't it say ‘Authorized Personnel Only’?”

Kenneth forcibly pulled Seina, who tried to stop, and Rajau pushed him from behind.

“It's fine. We're authorized personnel.” Kenneth said proudly.

“Oh, it's Seina, Kenneth, and Rajau!”

One of the students exclaimed, and all eyes instantly turned toward them, like spectators watching actors walk down a runway.

“Damn it! I'm so jealous of them.”

“Why only Seina and his team?”

“Hey! What tricks did you guys pull?!”

Kenneth and Rajau waved cheerfully at their shouting classmates, still pulling Seina deeper into the building. Hearing the commotion, women dressed more like researchers than staff members, who had been working in the back, turned toward Seina and the boys.

“Oh, welcome back. Sorry for the inconvenience,” they said cheerfully.

“No, no, it's no big deal.”

“Everyone, thank you for your hard work.”

Behind Kenneth and Rajau, who grinned happily and rubbed their hands together, Seina

slumped, clutching his head.

(I should've considered the possibility this would happen…)

“So you're the famous Seina-kun. I'm Hakuren. Nice to meet you.”

There stood Hakuren in a lab coat, and behind her, Karen, Suiren, and Gyokuren were all smiling at Seina.

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“Pretty spacious now, huh? This is apparently a new GP housing unit."

Seina and the boys’ room now had a slightly more spacious bathroom unit, and the living area incorporated a wood finish, giving the whole place a luxurious feel. Still, to Seina, who had been living in Amane's penthouse, it seemed quite cramped and modest. The room assigned to him at Amane's house had been too large, so Seina had arranged the furniture within a space about the size of a six tatami mat room and lived within that. But the sense of confinement in a walled-off six tatami mat space versus a six tatami mat section within a vastly larger space was worlds apart.

“Uh, yeah… I guess so.”

“Kenneth-kun. Although it's a new model, functionally it's not that different from the previous model. So it's more appropriate to call it a new standard.”

“A new standard?”

“Yes. Originally, the GP was military-based, so habitability wasn't prioritized. But recently, with the expansion of delivery services and population growth due to the number of inhabited star systems, the GP itself has grown in scale. That means there's less time for training, so they have to use less skilled personnel just to keep operations running. So, the GP is trying to show they're investing in employee benefits…”

“Rajau, cut the complicated explanations. Bottom line, it's bait for new recruits, bait! More importantly, Seina! Did you see them? Those beautiful ladies!” Kenneth said gleefully, as he pushed past Rajau.

“Uh, yeah… I guess.” Seina answered, somewhat confused by Kenneth and Rajau’s obvious

intentions.

“Hey, hey, what's with that lackluster response? Beauties like that are rare! Or what? You're saying you don't think they're that amazing because you're used to seeing Amane-sensei all the time?”

“That's not it. Gyokuren-san is just as beautiful as Amane-sensei…”

“True! Though they are quite contrasting in image.”

“But she's that stunning. She should be fairly well-known, yet no matter where I look, I can't find her profile. So those women aren't from the Academy. They're probably from another research institute.”

“Forget that. How do we capitalize on this lucky situation?”

“You're right.”

“Lucky situation?” Seina murmured in puzzlement. It wasn't that he didn't understand what Kenneth and Rajau were thinking. He just reacted to the jarring word “lucky.”

Kenneth cleared his throat once and began speaking like an adult lecturing a child. “Ahem. Listen up, Seina. We're currently in an area off-limits to regular students. And right next to that area, right next to our dormitory, is the staff quarters where they live! What else would you call this but luck?”

(More like intentional than lucky… and pretty blatant at that) Seina pictured Kiriko's displeased expression upon learning this. (If Kiriko-san finds out, she'll explode.)

At the Juraian mansion by the secret lake ten thousand kilometers away, Kiriko and Seto faced each other. A short distance away, Minaho sat, glancing at her watch.

“That's way too obvious!” Kiriko snapped.

Just as Seina had feared, Kiriko, having heard from Seto about Hakuren and the others' assignments, was very angry.

“Even sending maids was taking things too far, but now isolating only Seina-chan's team for study by “Archaeological Researchers”? This is a complete joke!”

“We can't exactly send maids to the GP boys' dormitory, can we?”

“I'm telling you, there are plenty of ways to escort someone secretly!”

“But it's already at full capacity, you see. There are so many people hiding around Seina-dono that is looks like a rush hour traffic jam.”

“Then why don't you just leave it to them!”

“Like Tennyo-chan did earlier?”

“!!”

The moment she heard those words, Kiriko froze in shock, as if struck by paralysis.

“This time it was family, so it's fine… but still, it's annoying when someone else gets the good parts, isn't it?” Seto said calmly to Kiriko, who looked like she was about to cry, but inside, she panicked, thinking she'd gone too far.

“You feel the same way, don’t you, Minaho-chan! You like Seina-dono too, so it must be frustrating!” In an attempt to lighten the mood, Seto tried to bring up a topic with Minaho, but Minaho knew that speaking up would not only not help Seto but would also prolong the conversation unnecessarily, so she remained silent and pretended not to hear.

“Damn it!”

Ignored by Minaho, Seto began thinking about how to resolve the situation. But before she could say anything,

“As long as Seina-chan is okay, that's all that matters…” Kiriko said in a faint voice.

“……You really have no shortage of ability. Why are you so passive when it comes to yourself?” Seto said, as she turned back to Kiriko with exasperation.

“Hey, Kiriko-chan. I did plan this operation, but the personnel were volunteers. Hakuren and the girls came forward saying they wanted to do it.”

“Huh!?” Kiriko's hand clenched tightly upon hearing Seto's words.

Seeing this, Seto pressed on relentlessly.

“The field requires flexibility. How they'll escort Seina-dono… I haven't given them any specific instructions about that, of course.”

Stirred by Seto's words, anger mixed with fierce determination rapidly returned to Kiriko's expression.

(This is no joke. He only learned about Miki-san this morning. Meeting Tennyo-sama hasn't healed that wound… At least at a time like this, couldn't you just leave him alone?)

If It was Hakuren and the girls' own initiative rather than Seto's orders, that was a different story. For cannonballs or bullets, the best approach would be to destroy the guns or cannons at the firing point—meaning Seto. But if it was a self guided missile, then the only option was to deal with Hakuren and the girls—though that was almost exclusively limited to Gyokuren…

“Hey, Kiriko-chan. When you're holding anger or sadness with nowhere to vent it, like this, sometimes it's better not to give yourself time to overthink things.” Seto said calmly, reading Kiriko's emotions, as if offering gentle advice.

“But then…”

“Would you hate it if Seina-dono thought you weren't sad about Miki-san? But I'm sure he would know there are more important things to do than be grieving right now.” Seto cut Kiriko off.

Struck by the truth, Kiriko fell silent, her lips pressed into a frown.

“You should be worrying about something else instead. It's true that you have a great advantage… but that advantage may not last forever.”

“I don't think I have any advantage, and Seina-chan and I aren't in the kind of relationship Seto-sama expects us to be!”

“Ohhh hohoho! Hakuren-chan and her team aren't the only enemies, you know.”

Seto was pleased that Kiriko took the bait and, she continued, “Now then, Minaho-chan, don't pretend you can't hear us over there! Don't let Kiriko-chan beat you. Go after Seina-kun!” She declared in a strangely high-spirited tone.

“If Seto-sama would just do her job properly, I'd have more time and that might be possible,” Minaho promptly poured cold water on Seto's enthusiasm, stood up straight, and approached Kiriko, blocking Seto's line of sight.

“It's that look on your face that makes Seto-sama toy with you,” she said, gently stroking Kiriko’s head, as she looked at Minaho anxiously.

“…hehe. Maybe you should show that face to Seina-kun.”

“Hey Minaho-chan! Don't get in the way!”

“Time's up!” Minaho said in a cold tone as she turned back toward Seto.

Then, just as she had done to her own mother moments before, she mercilessly grabbed Seto's collar and began pulling her out of the room.

“Huh!? No way! This is just getting interesting!”

“You've had your fun, haven't you? Stop being so selfish.” Minaho's tone was quiet, but it carried an intimidating weight. While it couldn't match the overwhelming, crushing pressure Seto possessed, it held enough force to prevent any resistance.

“Hey, Minaho-chan, just five more minutes!”

“No.”

“Please, just three more minutes…” Seto's weak, pleading voice faded away behind the screen.

“That was something, huh? The way she grabbed Seto-sama by the collar and pulling her

away.” Amane said, as she and Elma entered, replacing Minaho and Seto.

“The way she treats Airi-sama… Minaho-sama, she’s surprisingly strict, isn’t she?”

“I'd heard about it from the senior secretary… but seeing it right in front of me is surprising.”

“Yeah… Huh? What's up, Kiriko? Still feeling down?” Amane sat down beside Kiriko a bit roughly and nudged her shoulder lightly.

“What's important to you is that Seina gets better, right? It's a shame that it wasn't you who initiated it… but what Tennyo-san did was treatment, not a cure, and it doesn't mean that all of Seina's problems have been resolved. There's still plenty more that Kiriko and we can do. Of course, it's a different story if you leave it all to the maids, right?” Amane said this in a rapid-fire manner, then smiled broadly.

Kiriko glanced at Amane and sighed deeply, then smiled wryly. “Indeed, sometimes it's better not to give them time to think things over.”

“Alright! Let's go!”

Amane and Elma grabbed Kiriko's arms as she stood up and pulled her out of the room with a cheerful look on their faces.

“So… Kiriko-san, what exactly are you going to do?”

“…Right. Anyway, I have a good idea.”

"Ho-ho. Shall we hear it then? Master Strategist."

“Roger that.” Kiriko couldn't help but smile at Amane's infectious brightness.

“This is truly divine providence! We absolutely must seize this opportunity!”

“Exactly!”

Seina couldn't help but feel a growing sense of unease watching Kenneth and Rajau passionately debate.

(Kenneth has a light-hearted personality, but he's also quite sensitive. In that sense, Rajau is more level-headed…)

Kenneth's almost manic, high energy level felt completely unnatural, a stark contrast to this morning's heavy atmosphere. Miki's incident had been shocking for Seina too. Fortunately, reuniting with Tennyo had given him a direction, a guiding goal, allowing him to recover. But…

(…Ah, I see.)

At that moment, Seina realized that Kenneth and Rajau were desperately trying to find

something that would help them forget that incident.

Seina's team and Miki's team had become reasonably close, despite the short time they spent together. Kenneth was starting to feel something for Miranda, and Rajau for Caliche—nothing serious, but a certain fondness nonetheless. But these feelings were directly tied to Miki's incident. So the desire to forget clashed with the guilt of trying to forget. What's more, they felt guilty about trying to forget Miranda and Caliche by becoming infatuated with other women.

(Maybe it's better that Gyokuren-san and the others feel like unattainable flowers, out of reach.)

Seina recalled the admiration he'd held for Kiriko for over a decade. The fact that his goal was distant meant he could remain infatuated for a long time, and that it was also a reckless challenge beyond his reach, which lessened his sense of guilt.

“…So, Seina-kun! Please ask them out on a date.”

“Huh?…Whaaaaaaaat?! Me?”

“Apparently they're not from the Academy, and fortunately, they seem interested in you.”

“If that's the case, then if we use the excuse of showing them around the Academy, we should have a pretty good chance of luring them out.”

“With Seina's deep pockets, we could even take them to a nice restaurant.”

“Funds? I don't have that kind of money… Oh!”

At that moment, Seina remembered the profits from the poached meat he'd acquired when he came to the dorm.

(Come to think of it, that money is still untouched… Even when I was staying at Amane-san's house, she paid for everything… But)

Logically speaking, with the funds in Seina's account, a pretty lavish date would be possible. But the other party was Seto's ladies-in-waiting.

(Out of curiosity, I once looked up online comparisons of the hospitality I received on board the Mikagami… And the price of a similar dinner was the same as my savings… And that “Shinju Sake” - in my case it was juice - but still, you'd have to wait a hundred years for a reservation, and one glass of it mixed with other liquor would cost more than a thousand times my entire fortune…)

Of course, for Hakuren and the others, that hospitality was strictly business—it wasn't something they did in their personal lives. A few dates would be easily covered by Seina's funds. But with Gyokuren alone, even that would vanish in an instant—Seina was certain about that.

“Perfect, Kenneth-kun!”

“Ha ha ha! Then let's get started on the operation tonight!”

(Well, if my savings can distract Kenneth and Rajau, then so be it. Besides, the money from that chicken thing was easy money to begin with.) Seina thought as he looked at the happy faces of Kenneth and Rajau. However, their plan was never put into action.

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“Hey, where are you going?”

An hour later, several surveillance monitors were activated in Seina's room.

“The toilet! The toilet!” Kenneth said in an annoyed tone as he emerged from the secret wall and ran into the bathroom.

“I never thought we'd get a staff member involved too…” Rajau looked at Seina with a confused expression.

——Avoid unnecessary conversation or communication with female staff. Except in emergencies, access is restricted to the designated area between the residential facility entrance and the fence entrance.——

These were the rules the staff had laid down for Seina and the other two. It was decided they would be under complete surveillance 24 hours a day—by their classmates during the day and by the staff at night. Naturally, to counter this, Kenneth and the boys constantly maintained an invisible secret wall. However, its effective range was limited to only a small part of the room, so they had to step outside it to use the bathroom or leave the room. It was, at best, merely a means to protect their privacy.

“Come to think of it, the men Hakuren-san and the others are interested in probably aren't students… Most of the dorm staff are single, after all.”

“Damn it, this is going too far! How can they allow this?!” Kenneth grumbled as he emerged from the bathroom.

“Well, all the rules have been approved by the dorm director, so there's nothing we can do about it.”

“If that's the case, I'd rather be in the same building as the others, where there's no surveillance.”

“Direct communication is restricted, so we could use an online chat room, but the problem is how to tell them where it is.”

“What about classic methods like flashing lights or passing notes?”

“People would find it creepy unless you're already somewhat friendly. And they've obviously got surveillance systems outside too.”

“Is there no way to resist this unjust oppression?!”

“If we had Seina-kun's NB, maybe…”

“Oh! Seina, where's your NB?” Kenneth grabbed Seina's shoulder firmly.

“They took it away because of some malfunction or something.”

“Damn! …Right! In that case, we'll just have to pretend it's a coincidence and try to make contact when Hakuren-san and the others go out! Rajau, can't you somehow find out their patterns of movement?”

“The detailed restoration work plan was posted on the GP Academy website, but…”

“So, by looking at that, it's possible to predict their behavior to some extent, right?”

“Yes, probably… Found it, here it is.” The monitor Rajau displayed showed the dorm renovation work details and the timetable.

“Let's see, Hakuren-san and the others…” Kenneth said as he leaned in to look at the monitor.

Then, “Is Yamada Seina there?” A call from the dormitory staff interrupted.

“Whoa!

While Kenneth and Rajau scrambled to the corner of the room in sheer shock, Seina saluted and stepped in front of the monitor.

“Yamada Seina, report immediately to the faculty lounge of Instructors Amane Kaunaq and Masaki Kiriko within GP Academy.”

“Yes sir.”

Ten minutes after this communication, Seina went to Amane and Kiriko's office and was essentially abducted, undergoing his second round of Bio-Enhancement.

Within Kirche's program space in NB, Seina was sleeping peacefully. To be precise, it was a part of Seina's subconscious, but it could not be connected unless Seina's body was asleep. And he would not wake up unless Kirche woke him up.

Suddenly, an alarm began to ring. It was the signal that Seina's body had fallen asleep, and that it was time for him to wake up. Usually, Kirche would have waited impatiently for this moment to come, heading over to Seina's bed and gently shaking him awake, but today she was sitting on the sofa in the living room, lost in thought.

“Hmm?…What's this?”

Miki's father, Hiroshi, sitting across from Kirche, looked up and around, but the alarm immediately stopped.

“If I hadn't been here…” Kirche began to speak about what had happened this morning—Miki's personal transfer.

It all happened in an instant. Miki's physical data suddenly began to appear before Kirche's eyes.

“Are you Miki-san?”

“…Kirche? Why are you here, you've been missing…?”

That was the only conversation they had.

“Take this!” Miki, whose transfer had failed, left behind a single letter and vanished.

“…It's my fault.”

Within NB, two Astral-bearers could normally coexist. But the reason it hadn't worked was because Kirche had unconsciously rejected Miki when she intruded into her space.

“Stop blaming yourself like that. This isn't your fault.” Hiroshi said while carefully holding the letter Miki had left, which Kirche had given him.

“Based on the transfer log, the transfer was incomplete, which means the connection was likely dropped midway.”

“But…”

“You didn't know Miki was a Pinocchio, and Miki didn't know you were here… It's no wonder you were confused; this was an event neither of you could have anticipated. Still, if you hadn't accepted this letter, even this might have vanished. Thank you so much.” With that, Hiroshi bowed deeply toward Kirche.

“…What do you think of me?”

“Huh? What do you mean, 'what do I think'?”

“I ran away from my father, and now I'm here… I'm keeping him here against his will…” Kirche spoke with a look of confusion, almost as if confessing.

She had once asked Airi the same question before. But she had really wanted to ask Hiroshi, the creator of Miki, an Astral AI just like Kirche.

Realizing her intention, Hiroshi stared at her, “……Well, it's a common story out there. So common, you could sweep them up and gather enough to fill a galaxy.” He said casually, in a perfectly ordinary tone.

“Huh?”

“Meaning there are as many as the stars. You have your own job, you support yourself… In other words, you're another human being, an adult. While you are an Astral AI, it's simply

how you were born. Becoming an idol shouldn't be solely because of some special birth. I think you should have a little more confidence in yourself.”

“……I…”

Tears welled up in Kirche's eyes. But they weren't tears of sadness—they were tears of joy. Kirche had lacked confidence in being a person in her own right. She couldn't shake the feeling that she was merely the property of the one who created her.

“It's the same with your father. People are born and raised in different places, and their values and standards are all different. What we consider normal or common sense is often not the case for the other person. When emotions take precedence over reason, there is no way to reach an agreement. Often, it's difficult to even have a dialogue. But in the end, dialogue is the only way to bridge the gap between us. Sometimes you have to be forceful, sometimes delicate, and sometimes you have to stall and wait.”

“Yes… but…” Kirche looked towards Seina's bedroom.

“Airi-sama didn't allow you to be here just for your own pleasure. Seina-kun's consciousness here affects the real world. Right now, Seina-kun is very hurt.”

“Can I… heal Seina-san?”

Hiroshi smiled and nodded in response to Kirche's question.

“As a man, I'm really jealous of Seina-kun for being surrounded by such charming women like you.”

“Oh, no…”

(Gah! How adorable!)

Seeing Kirche blush and look down, Hiroshi clenched his fist.

“But as Miki's father, having such a formidable rival for my daughter right here makes me feel a bit conflicted.”

“So you believe Miki-san is safe?”

“Of course.”

“If there's anything I can do to help, I will.”

“Thank you… Then, may I ask for one favor right away?”

“Yes.”

“Would you give me your autograph?” Hiroshi said, scratching his head in embarrassment.

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As Tsukiko and Hakuryo watched, Hiroshi regained consciousness, quickly got up, and looked at NB, who had returned to its spherical form.

“You were so uncharacteristically talkative. You seemed like a different person. Were you trying to woo her? Or was it because you’re a fan?” Tsukiko looked into Hiroshi's face with interest and in a light tone, like an older sister talking to her younger brother.

“I was a little surprised myself… But when I thought of her as a girl who was struggling with her relationship with her father, the words came out quite easily.”

“I see. That makes sense.”

“Okay, now that we have the information we need, let’s get started. Hakuryo-kun, can you help me?”

To avoid further teasing from Tsukiko, Hiroshi ran off with Hakuryo to his research space.

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Kirche thought as she looked at the sofa where Hiroshi had disappeared.

(I can heal Seina-san's heart.)

Just the thought of it made her heart leap. Even if Seina never paid her any attention in the real world, she felt happy knowing that she could do something for him.

Kirche rushed to the kitchen, checked the food she had made for Seina, then took a deep breath and headed to Seina's bedroom as usual.

The sound wouldn't wake Seina, but Kirche slowly and quietly opened the door and entered the dimly lit room with the curtains drawn. Looking at Seina, who was sleeping peacefully on the semi-double bed in the center of the room, Kirche approached the edge of the bed, reached out to Seina, and gently shook his body as she spoke.

“Seina-san, Seina-san.”

As always, Seina awoke to Kirche's voice.

——The next morning.

In Seina's room in Amane's penthouse, Hakuren and her team, dressed in maid uniforms, and Kiriko and Elma were preparing breakfast in exactly the same way as the day before.

“Kiriko-sama, you're so unfair.” Gyokuren glanced at Kiriko while wiping the table.

“Well said, coming from the shallow one who jumped on Seto-sama's foolish plan.”

“We simply wanted to cheer Seina-sama up, that's all.”

“I'm telling you to pick a place!”

Ignoring the commotion, Seina was communicating with Kenneth and Rajau from within the secret wall.

(I wonder if Kenneth and Rajau are okay? After all, I woke up at Amane-san's house after being called out of our room.)

Surprisingly, the call to Kenneth and Rajau went directly to their room.

“Oh, Seina-kun, good morning. How are you feeling?”

"Good morning Rajau, my body is fine. I'm… sorry, it's just me again… at a time like this."

“Don't worry. I'm also relieved that Seina-kun went to Amane-sensei’s.”

“Huh?”

“Actually, we got a call from Miranda and Caliche yesterday.”

“You mean Miki-senpai's classmates?”

“Yes. Even though they must be far more shocked than us, they still reached out to check on us.”

“I see.”

“So, the four of us talked about it… They’re really concerned about Seina-kun.”

“Thanks. I'm fine, though.”

“Haha, well, Amane-sensei and Kiriko-sensei are there too. So both us and the senpais felt a little relieved.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Oh, and one more thing—actually, right after Seina-kun was called away, Hakuren-san and the others disappeared.”

“Huh?!… They left?”

“From what I heard, it seems they were only there to check the ruins' condition and collect samples. Apparently, they don't live in that dormitory.”

(I figured… since they're here now)

“Everyone was shocked, especially Kenneth-kun.”

(…They absolutely can't find out that Hakuren-san and the girls are here.)

Though it was already sufficient, Seina quickly raised the level of the secret wall.

“Well, it was just a fleeting dream that lasted a single day, but thanks to them leaving, everyone's surveillance and communication restrictions were lifted, so I got to talk with the senpais late into the night. That's why Kenneth-kun is still asleep.”

“I see. That's good… But I'm sorry for waking you up.”

“I was already awake. But if you have something you want to talk about with Kenneth-kun, should I wake him up?”

“That’s fine, let him sleep. I can't make it to the practical classes, but I'll join remotely as usual, so we can talk then.”

“I see, then please do your best in your training.”

“Yeah.”

Seina gazed happily at the space where the communication monitor had vanished. The presence of people who cared about him made him realize this place was truly where he belonged. And a strong resolve welled up within him—to protect this place and these people.

“Hey, Seina!”

Amane's image appeared before Seina, who had been lost in his thoughts.

“How long are you going to stay holed up in there? Things get busy again starting today, so hurry up and come out! Breakfast will get cold!”

Even though over a month had passed since he started living with Amane, Amane's beauty still possessed a power that could leave him stunned and mesmerized.

(The saying that beauty fades after three days is definitely a lie.)

Amane's beauty, paired with her surprisingly bold tone, was like the dance of Ame-no-Uzume that lured Amaterasu out of the heavenly rock cave. **(TN: Japanese mythology. It’s interesting and way to long to discuss here, look it up.)**

“I'll be right there.” Seina quickly cut the secret wall and started walking toward Amane and the others.

“You finally came out. Did you sleep well last night? Any physical discomfort?”

“Yeah, I feel great. I slept incredibly well and my mood is fantastic.”

“Well, that's good to hear.”

Next to Amane, who was sitting cross-legged, Kiriko placed a bowl of miso soup where Seina was sitting.

“Come on, sit down.”

Kiriko's gentle voice, and the dining table surrounded by Amane, Elma, Hakuren, Gyokuren, Karen, and Suiren, beckoned Seina warmly like the light of a clear day.

In stark contrast to that…

In the dim light, test tubes, flasks, and meter-laden devices resembling torture instruments floated in the faint glow. In a laboratory straight out of an Earth gothic horror film, a figure in a lab coat muttered with a groan.

“You bastards… How dare you, how dare you cast me aside! This grudge… I shall not let it go unavenged!”

The figure illuminated by the glowing discharge within a massive glass tube, its face bound in bandages and eyes burning with madness, was Airi.

“Huh huh huh… Come now, my servants. Let's have a little celebration.”

Airi's eerie laughter fell upon Seina's NB, placed before her. One by one, points of light began to appear on its body.

“Ahahahaha~~! I'll show you! I'll show you all~~… Oh?” Just as she dramatically raised her hand toward the sky and declared this, the surroundings abruptly shifted. The eerie laboratory transformed into Airi's brightly lit office, flooded with light.

“It's time to get to work.” The expressionless secretary general said this in a terribly businesslike tone to Airi, who was frozen mid-pose in her dramatic act.

“Hey, don't interrupt me! I was just getting to the good part!”

Airi, wrapped in bandages and wearing a stained and tattered lab coat, had fit perfectly into the lab's atmosphere moments before. Now, however, she looked terribly out of place—downright ridiculous, to be blunt.

“You were just bothering people for some trivial reason, weren't you?”

“Listen… I'm really hurt, you know!” As Airi shouted angrily, embarrassed, the Secretary-General activated a holographic image of herself, identical to the real person, then promptly returned to her seat.

“It's time to get to work,” the hologram repeated the same words the Secretary General had spoken earlier.

“It's not just this face—my heart bears deep, deep wounds too…”

“You were just bothering people for some trivial reason, weren't you?”

“To heal those wounds, it's okay to take a little break!”

“It's time to get to work.”

“You girls just don't get it!”

“You were just bothering people for some trivial reason, weren't you?”

“I can't believe how much I've worn down my nerves under the care of that incredibly nasty old hag…”

“It's time to back to work.”

“Ah! Where is the one who will gently heal my wounded heart and body?”

“You were just bothering people for some trivial reason, weren't you?”

“…Hey, don't slack off!” Airi yelled at the secretary-general sitting at her desk working.

But the secretaries present completely ignored Airi, absorbed in their work.

“We're about to start work now.”

“…… Hey.”

“You were just bothering people for some trivial reason, weren't you?”

“…… Hey”

“It's about time we started working.”

“…… Hold on.”

“You were just bothering people for some trivial reason, weren't you?”

“…… Um—”

“It's about time you got to work.”

“…… Well, that is…”

“You were just bothering people for some trivial reason, weren't you?”

“…… Ugh…”

“It's about time we got to work.”

“Fine! I'll start! I'll just start, won't I! I hate everyone!” Airi headed to her seat, crying.

That day, Seina was taking his usual online classes in his room.

“See you tomorrow then.”

“Yeah, see you.”

After class ended, Seina exchanged brief greetings with Kenneth and Rajau before turning off his monitor. As if timing it perfectly, Suiren entered with a knock, carrying a paulownia wood box.

“Excuse me. I have a delivery for Seina-sama…” Speaking in a barely audible voice, Suiren gently placed the paulownia box on the low table usually used for breakfast.

“Ah, thank you… Wait, is this maybe—” Seina rushed over, recognizing the box.

“Yes, it was just delivered from Airi-sama's workshop.”

“I see, it's been repaired…” Seina broke the seal on the paulownia box, then hesitated before opening the lid.

“What… is it?”

“Ah, no… I was just worried it might start talking in Airi-san's voice again…”

“Heh… I suppose so.” Suiren smiled faintly.

“Did you laugh?” Seeing this, Seina looked at Suiren with a slightly surprised expression.

“…Is that so strange?”

“That's not it… Not at all. It's just… Suiren-san's smiling face… No, since you’re always so expressionless, seeing any other expression for the first time is just a little…”

Compared to the other maids, Suiren was always quiet, showing almost no change in expression. There was Hakuren, the intelligent one who acted as the leader; Karen, the boyish and active one; and Gyokuren, whose beauty rivaled Amane's and who carried a dangerous aura. Among them, Suiren was extremely quiet. Standing silently, she could be mistaken for a mannequin or a doll… no, her presence was even fainter than that. Today was the first time Seina had ever seen Suiren assert herself like this.

(Ah, but Suiren-san is the only one of the four who wears glasses… It's not so much intellectual as it is somehow endearing, isn't it?) Seina thought this as he stared intently at Suiren's face. (But really, she is a beautiful person too…)

“…Um, Seina-sama, please don't stare at me like that. I'm not used to being looked at so much.” Saying that, Suiren suddenly flushed and looked down.

“Ahhh! I-I'm sorry!”

Suiren's reaction was so delicate and direct that Seina blushed just as much and looked away. Being around women like Kiriko and Amane felt somehow unreal to him. To live with women who were practically top models or actresses, he needed to dull his senses and consciousness, to put up a mental shield. Otherwise, maintaining his sanity in this house would be impossible—or rather, torture—for a young man like Seina. Yet even that shield

was as thin as the film on warm milk in the face of Amane and the other women's allure, easily shattered by the slightest thing.

(Calm down… Calm down!) Seina desperately tried to rebuild his mental shield.

Just then, “Hey, you! Get me out of here already!” NB yelled from inside, shaking the paulownia box violently.

“Well, I'll be off then.” Startled, Suiren bowed and fled the room.

Watching her retreating figure with relief, Seina opened the lid of the paulownia box.

“Ah, I thought I was going to suffocate!” NB burst out of the box like a jack-in-the-box.

“Like you'd suffocate… Good, looks like the settings are still the same.”

Seina checked the contents of the paulownia box NB had been in, then opened the closet door. Looking at the neatly organized closet, arranged by Kiriko to prevent his things from collapsing, Seina tried to remember where this NB’s box had been placed before.

“Hey NB, where was your box kept before? …NB?” Finding NB's lack of response odd, Seina poked his head out of the closet and looked in NB's direction.

“Huh?”

But looking around the entire room, NB was nowhere to be seen. And the first angry shout came just a few minutes later.

An hour later, everyone living in the Amane penthouse gathered in the living room, glaring at NB.

“Enough already! What do you think you're doing barging into the ladies' room and private rooms?!”

“It's been a while since I've been here, so I just wanted to double-check the layout.”

“Then what's your excuse for peeking down people's blouses and up their skirts?”

“I was just showing affection. My 'Top 100 Old Men' list made me do it. Besides, Amane-san installed it half-jokingly in the first place, right?”

With NB's words, everyone glared at Amane. But she didn't seem to care, wearing a defiant smile.

“Hah! I won't be fooled. It's obvious Airi-sama planted something to harass me!”

“W-where's your the proof of that?!”

“It's always bothered me. Do you remember? That day, when Airi-sama was wrapped up in straw mats?”

“Ah!” Everyone gasped simultaneously.

“After what happened to Airi-sama, there's no way she'd just sit quietly.”

“Ah! …Come to think of it, the Secretary-General mentioned that Airi-sama wasn't doing any work, just playing around saying something about grudges…”

At Elma's words, everyone looked at NB. The very next moment, NB's body became transparent.

“Well then, bye-bye~~” With that lighthearted remark, NB vanished completely from sight.

“Hmm, so it even has optical camouflage capabilities.” Amane smiled and brought her outstretched hand in front of her.

“H-how did you know where I was…” NB, gripped in Amane's palm, deactivated its optical camouflage and revealed itself.

Every woman present was highly trained in diverse, advanced skills. Each had blocked the NB's escape routes, driving it towards Amane.

“Elma, please.”

“Roger.” Elma roughly thrust a terminal into NB.

“Ah! Stop… Be gentler…”

“Shut up! I'll crush you right here!” A circuit-like pattern appeared on Amane's arm. It was a Guardian, possessing the power to crush NB with ease.

“Found it! The 'Top 100 Old Men' program has several plug-in’s installed… 'Sexual Harassment,' 'Peeping,' 'Voyeurism,' and more.”

“What was the Academy Chairman thinking? Can I delete them all? Hmm, maybe I should just reset it to default?”

“Ah, Amane. I believe the NB default is…”

“Right, it was Airi-sama's voice… Well, even after installing 'Top 100 Old Men', this thing's behavior wasn't too problematic. So, just deleting the new plug-in software and the suspicious programs should be fine for now.”

“Got it.” Elma swiftly deleted the programs that had likely been added later. But…

“Ahh!” Elma suddenly stopped and cried out.

“What is it?”

“The 'Friendship Folder' that belonged to Seina-kun is gone.”

“I deleted everything.” Seina interjected without pause, his words overlapping Elma's.

Seina had never stored any personal data on his NB, ensuring he'd be fine even in situations like this.

“Well, how unfortunate. If you'd like, I'll be your partner…”

“What did you say?!”

Before Kiriko could glare with a terrifying expression, Hakuren and the others had already covered Gyokuren's mouth and pinned her down.

“Elma! Don't say anything that'll stir up trouble!”

Elma pointed at the monitor as Amane looked at her in disbelief.

“Ah, no, but instead there's this strange folder…”

“A strange folder?”

“This… is probably personal data. Judging by the size, it's quite substantial.”

“Hmm. Sounds interesting. Why don't you fire one up for me?”

“Amane!”

Before Kiriko could stop her, Elma activated the data. Instantly, the NB Amane was holding began to pulsing and taking on a human form.

“I wonder whose personal data this is.”

Amane placed the NB on the floor, stepped back a little, and stared at it with keen interest.

“Mmm… Ahh…”

The NB let out a suggestive moan, its body undulating seductively as it began transforming.

“…… It looks like Amane-san… doesn't it?” Elma sighed as she watched Amane's face form.

Personal data, even when recreating an identical form, lacked presence or charm.

Like a Buddha without a soul—yet the Amane NB was transforming into possessed a charm powerful enough to paralyze everyone present. It was nothing short of the birth of a Goddess.

“!!”

But the instant NB Amane's ample breasts began to take on a firm form, Kiriko reflexively kicked NB Amane in the face. It was a kind of defensive reaction, not wanting Seina to see something suspicious. Then, like a child crushing a clay statue, she began throwing punches with terrifying force.

“Uwaaah! Kiriko-san!!”

The sheer ferocity of it caused Elma to panic and halt the program.

Kiriko stared down at NB, which deflated like a balloon and returned to its spherical form with a hiss.

“Ki-Kiriko! Don't just suddenly kick someone in the face!”

“That's right! If that punch had hit my core, I'd be dead!”

Amane and NB, their faces drained of color, shouted in unison. Ignoring them, Kiriko turned to Elma.

“Delete everything!”

“Y-yes!”

Overwhelmed by Kiriko's quiet anger, bordering on murderous intent, Elma reflexively darted behind the sofa.

“Whaaaaat? But it was so well done… such a waste…”

“This is no joke! From what I saw earlier, the character data has definitely been altered. Maliciously and intentionally… Amane, are you okay with being turned into some shady AV actress-like character?”

“Hmm… But I kinda wanna check what's in there first, heh heh.” Amane looked at Kiriko with an expression of keen interest.

“Honestly, even I noticed… it was a bit much… heh.” Gyokuren's words sparked interest in Elma, Hakuren, and the other girls too.

That's how compelling Amane's data had been just now.

“Besides,” she added, “getting to see a Philosopher at work up close is a rare opportunity…”

“You've got to be kidding me…”

Covering Kiriko's mouth as she shouted, “Alright then, hands up if you want to see it~~” Amane addressed the others.

“Hmm… Six in favor, one against (Kiriko), and Seina abstains since he's a minor. So, only those in favor will proceed to the other room for verification. Kiriko and Seina, wait here!” With that, Amane released the hand covering Kiriko's mouth.

“Wait a minute! I'm worried about you two going alone. I'm coming too.”

“Pfft, what's up, Kiriko? If you want to see it, just say so honestly.”

“If the personal data stored in there isn't just from the people here, we have to confirm the data files are deleted, right?”

“I see. That is important. If it's only our data, we can decide on our own, but if it's someone else's, we have to delete it unconditionally.” At Amane's words, all the supporters nodded in agreement.

“Right?”

Kiriko, her opinion readily affirmed by Amane, broke into a broad smile. But that was Amane's trap. Once a legitimate reason to view the contents existed, their focus would inevitably shift to curiosity about what was inside.

“Then let's hurry and check the contents.”

The satisfaction of proving her opinion right, the thrill of foiling Airi's prank, a hint of anticipation about the data, and the fact that Gyokuren and the others had deliberately hidden Seina from Kiriko's view all combined to make Kiriko happily start leading Amane and the others away. As if expecting something, they left the living room with light steps.

“…It makes me feel like a suspicious male student that leaves the classroom to look at a pornographic magazine someone brought to school in a secluded place…” Seina, left alone in the living room, mumbled as he looked in the direction Kiriko and the others had disappeared.

“I always thought it was just guys who did that kind of thing, but when they're in a group, boys and girls aren't that different after all…” Seina said with deep feeling, then sat down on the sofa and turned on the monitor to work on his assignment.

Of course, visually speaking, Kiriko and the others were overwhelmingly more beautiful, needless to say.

(But… Kiriko-san at times like that… kind of reminds me of Kai…) Seina murmured softly in his mind, words that would probably make Kiriko faint from embarrassment if she heard them.

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About two hours later, after Seina finished the day's assignments and was checking the programs he wanted to watch, Kiriko and the others returned to the living room, their cheeks flushed and faces glowing.

Kiriko dropped the now-dead NB onto the sofa, “I deleted everything that looked suspicious.”

With that, she headed to the kitchen with Karen to prepare dinner. The others, Gyokuren excluded, went listlessly to their respective rooms.

Everyone must have been extremely mentally exhausted, because no one noticed the situation they'd created—leaving Seina and Gyokuren alone together, something they would never normally do.

“I'm completely torn to shreds, completely damaged…”

“Maybe I should uninstall 'Top 100 Old Men' after all?”

Seina looked down at NB, who was crying with his face buried in the sofa, a confused expression on his face.

“You too, Master! You're trying to take something important away from me too, aren't you?!” If NB had a proper face, it would have looked like he was staring at his mortal enemy. But even just his voice conveyed NB's intent perfectly.

“Huh? It's that important? 'Top 100 Old Men'…”

“……”

Seina's single remark caused NB's anger to fade rapidly.

“Yeah… Come to think of it, it's not really that important after all.”

“In that case, would you like me to reinstall my personal data?”

“Huh? Whoa! Gyokuren-san, you were here?”

Startled by the sudden voice, Seina stumbled and sat down on the sofa.

“The personal data from earlier belonged to everyone living here. They were so well-made that we decided each person should manage their own. Would you like to take a look?”

The moment Gyokuren flashed a bright smile, Seina's defense instincts shot into the red zone.

“I'm… interested, but I think I'd better not.”

Seina scooped up NB and quickly fled the scene. But just as he started up the stairs, Gyokuren's voice, almost like a muttered soliloquy, reached her from behind.

“Please, don't be so wary.”

It was her usual smooth, quiet tone, yet for some reason, it made Seina feel strangely uneasy.

“Gyokuren…san?”

Seina spun around in alarm. Gyokuren's figure was barely visible, silhouetted against the sunset glow. With her overwhelming beauty obscured, perhaps Seina could see her true essence. Gyokuren stood there, like a child left behind, frozen in place, looking lonely and vulnerable. Seina recognized that image.

(…Like me, back then.)

In his childhood, shunned by everyone and left all alone… Seina knew well the pain of being judged not by his essence, but by what was added to it—Seina's misfortune and Gyokuren's beauty. Of course, it could have been a trap set by Gyokuren, but Seina no longer had any desire to shake her off and run away from it.

“Did you forget something?”

Seeing Seina return, Gyokuren tilted her head in a slightly puzzled manner. Normally, one would have thought that Seina had feelings for Gyokuren personally, but the look in Seina's eyes was so sincere that it didn't occur to Gyokuren.

Seina didn't answer Gyokuren's question. Instead, he smoothly approached Gyokuren. He was stepping into a zone he would never have dared enter before. It was the distance where the young Seina felt safe when Kiriko, Tsukiko, Kiyone, or Tennyo were there for him during sad or painful times. Of course, from Gyokuren's perspective, it was the usual, natural distance they maintained. But this was the first time Seina had ever approached.

“Seina-sama?”

Though she didn't show it outwardly, Gyokuren was terribly flustered. And that fluster was transforming into a powerful urge to attack. Even Gyokuren herself was unaware of the immense destructive force hidden within the hand she was slowly raising. And that hand, triggered by the slightest provocation, would become the blade of a guillotine descending upon Seina.

Kiriko and Karen entered the kitchen, still mentally exhausted from earlier. They absentmindedly checked the evenings menu, took out the ingredients, and began cooking.

“Honestly, Airi-sama is such a handful. Putting something like that in Seina-chan's NB…”

As they performed their routine tasks, their mental states stabilized, and conversation began between them.

“It's a good thing we noticed it early… Still, that NB is ridiculously overpowered, isn't it?”

“Yeah… It’s super advanced, capable of handling personal data and even simulating top-tier medical procedures.”

“I've never heard of personal data that can eat and excrete either.”

“Well, Airi-sama is a philosopher, after all… If she wanted to, she could even make it conceive. Though, of course, that would raise too many ethical issues, so it wasn't included…”

“But that clothing data was really something, wasn't it?” Karen recalled it dreamily.

“It's true, there was an incredible amount of data, from underwear to accessories.”

NB contained personal data for Kiriko and the other girls, along with a vast array of clothing data. One reason it took them so long to return to the living room was that they'd been playing around, dressing them up with that data.

“But it gives me the creeps to think what would've happened if Seina-chan had accidentally activated that character with the awful personality.”

“After all, he’ll take the NB outside with him, won't he?”

"Yes! That's it. If that perverted character that Gyokuren was praising so much were to be activated in public, it would be suicide."

“At the very least, you couldn't stay in human civilization… Only someone like Gyokuren could be okay with something like that happening.”

“Yeah… ‘It's pretty intense, but I'm still not quite at that level yet,’ she said calmly… Oh!”

Only then did Kiriko finally realize Gyokuren and Seina might be alone in the living room. She dashed toward it. Karen immediately understood Kiriko's reason and followed.

(How careless!)

If Gyokuren managed to talk Seina into restoring her personal data to NB, it could be disastrous.

(If that personal data, even more irrational than Gyokuren, were to activate…!!)

Kiriko burst into the living room, then stopped short, bewildered by the strange atmosphere between the two facing each other.

“Wh-what…?”

Karen swiftly raised a hand, stopping Kiriko as she tried to approach the two. Noticing

Karen's tense, pale expression, Kiriko froze in place.

Karen and Kiriko weren't the only ones who had come into the living room. Almost simultaneously, Amane and Elma, along with Hakuren and Suiren, had also rushed in. Like Karen, Hakuren and Suiren had noticed Gyokuren's state and instantly stopped in their tracks. But the problem was Amane and Elma.

(Please!)

At that moment, Karen, Hakuren, and Suiren looked at Amane and Elma with desperate, pleading eyes. Fortunately, Amane, with her keen intuition, instantly read Gyokuren's strange behavior and the expressions on Karen's and the others' faces, and held Elma in place.

“What's going on, Karen?” Kiriko spoke to Karen over the special combat radio.

But Karen didn't respond, instead staring intently at Suiren's expression alongside Hakuren. Several minutes later, as Suiren's expression softened while fixedly watching Gyokuren, Gyokuren's aggressive impulse faded. She then collapsed, leaning against Seina as she lost consciousness.

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In the maid's waiting room, everyone except Seina gathered around Gyokuren, who lay on a bed.

“What happened?” Kiriko approached Hakuren with a stern expression, lowering her voice, once the situation had calmed down.

“But first…Amane-sama, thank you for stopping by.”

“Hmm?… Well, I thought maybe something like this could happen. Gyokuren seems like she's carrying something dark deep inside… She seems like a complicated girl. But that seems to be the source of her charm.”

“If only I had been as perceptive as Amane-sama, I wouldn't have had to get hurt.” Karen sighed and held her left arm, which looked fine, but had been injured by Gyokuren before.

“I was more worried about what NB would say.”

“Well, I'm also his bodyguard, so I can sense things like that.”

“…Gyokuren intensely dislikes others penetrating deep into her heart… No, 'dislikes' might not be quite right. It's more like some unknown entity dwells there, and it harms anyone who enters.”

“It felt like a child playing carelessly around a landmine.”

“Amane-sama's expression is probably the most fitting. Even though we've been friends for a long time, the only people who have seen it are Karen, Seina-sama, and one other man.”

“Was that person like Karen?”

“Yes. But even so, it wasn't as dangerous as Seina-sama. It might be hard to believe, but Gyokuren's rationality, which masks its true spiritual essence, is remarkably strong. You simply don't reach that core easily.”

“Calling that usual thing 'reason' still feels a bit unsettling, but considering the Gyokuren I saw in the parlor, I suppose I have to reluctantly admit it.”

“My apologies for the trouble, everyone.”

“!”

Zzzzzzz! The moment Gyokuren's voice rang out, everyone leapt back from her bed as if propelled by a spring. She stared at Kiriko and the others, huddled in the corner of the room like small animals cornered by a predator.

“Heh, but I'm delighted you acknowledge my rationality,” Gyokuren smiled with her usual devilishly beautiful features, looking even more imposing than before.

“Gyokuren, I have no intention of prying into your past, but I need one thing clarified. Are you really okay staying here like this?”

Resisting Gyokuren's pressure, Kiriko stood up and glared at her. When it came to Seina, Kiriko was almost like a wild beast. Amane and the others moved away from Kiriko and Gyokuren, positioning themselves somewhere safe in case of an emergency.

“…It feels like a clash of the titans, doesn't it?” Elma's involuntary comment drew nods from everyone huddled in the corner.

“Hey, Gyokuren. I'll ask again. Are you really okay?”

"Yes… When he so easily entered my innermost thoughts, I was honestly surprised, and on reflex I tried to kill Seina-sama...”

“!!”

At that instant, Kiriko's killing intent surged with terrifying intensity.

“…I take back what I said. It feels more like two giant battleships in human form are about to start shooting at each other.” Whether exasperated or resigned, Elma spoke in a calm tone.

“I can't guarantee it, but Elma-sama and Amane-sama, the three of us will protect you with all our might.”

“This is really a pain in the ass, isn't it?” Amane sank to the floor and sat cross-legged, propping herself up on one elbow.

“Should we relay this to the Master too?”

“NB! If you do that, I'll crush you!” Kiriko growled, her gaze fixed on Gyokuren.

Whether it hit the right spot or not, Gyokuren suddenly burst out laughing.

“Heh heh heh, please calm down, Kiriko-sama. Regarding this matter, there will never again be a situation that causes you any concern.”

“… Why are you so certain? What's your basis for that?”

“I lack the resolve and the right to hurt someone who dared to step into the depths of my heart. But…”

“You think Seina-chan has done that?”

“The night before the entrance ceremony… that wasn’t for nothing.”

“!!”

Kiriko realized she was referring to Seina making Widow turn herself in. Seina's heart, unbroken by misfortune, possessed a strength only those like Gyokuren and Widow—people swept away by circumstance and corrupted—could truly understand. And Kiriko felt something close to admiration and respect for that strength. Gyokuren and Widow were like deadly poisons that destroyed others. But Seina had the strength to remain untouched by it. That was what resolve and right truly meant.

(Did Gyokuren's dark heart acknowledge Seina-chan?)

“Yes.” Gyokuren said this as if reading Kiriko's mind.

At that instant, Amane and the others, who had been thinking the same thing as Kiriko, stared at Gyokuren in surprise.

“…… I understand. Very well. Karen, it's getting late. Let's hurry and prepare dinner.” Kiriko looked away from Gyokuren and headed towards the kitchen.

“Kiriko… Do you really understand what Gyokuren meant?” Amane quickly called out to Kiriko, who was about to leave with a relaxed expression.

“Huh?”

“She allowed Seina to enter the deepest part of her heart.”

“So?” Kiriko stared at Amane's face, puzzled.

Kiriko's lack of understanding about Amane's words stemmed from her primary concern: whether Gyokuren would hurt Seina. Now that that was resolved, her guard against Gyokuren had weakened.

“Does this make it clear? He’s the first person of the opposite sex she's ever allowed into the deepest part of her heart.”

“Huh? …Ahh!!” Finally grasping the implication, Kiriko looked at Gyokuren again with a stunned expression.

The power Seina had accumulated since childhood only attracted troublesome women. That, too, was Seina's bad luck.

“Heh.” Gyokuren flashed a supremely confident smile, as if challenging not just Kiriko, but everyone present.

“Gyokuren!”

And so, once again, the crisis of “a shootout between large battleships in human form” (Elma's words) erupted.

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“Haa… I'm starving…”

Meanwhile, in the living room, Seina—the cause of it all—hugged a cushion, enduring his hunger.

“Oh dear…”

At the entrance of Washu’s research lab, Seto sipped tea while reading Minaho's report with interest.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Washu, looking a bit pained, came up the stairs hidden behind the potted plants, supported by Noike.

“How's the Astral Link doing, Washu-chan?”

“I just finished transitioning it to the core.”

Supported by Noike, Washu sat down on a large cushion and smiled at Seto. Her left shoulder had been transformed into the same crystalline structure as Ryo-Ohki's hull, within which a tiny, bean-sized organism resembling an animal fetus was sealed.

“If I hadn’t told you about Seina-dono, you wouldn't have to go through all that trouble. You’re so peculiar.”

“Aren't you curious to know just how much of a woman the rumored Widow is?”

“From the looks of it, I'd say she's more than just a rumor.”

“I'm utterly shocked… Honestly, the way she could draw people in, Seina-dono's probability bias is quite fascinating. Damn it… If I'd known this would happen, I should have used him as a guinea pig while he was still on Earth.” Washu said, clenching her fists in frustration.

“This report just came up.” Seto moved the monitor plate she'd been reading earlier in front of Washu.

It was about Gyokuren and Seina at Amane’s penthouse.

“Hm?……Heh heh heh, what a splendid chance encounter. But as expected, it seems she didn't accept it so easily.”

After a quick check, Washu flicked the monitor plate with her pinky. This time, it stopped right in front of Noike.

“!…… Gyokuren, she’s something else…… Kiriko-san must have her hands full.” Noike said as she sighed, casting a critical glance at Seto, the root of the problem.

“Given Kiriko-chan's personality, she probably won't snap at us over this. So, Noike-chan, you'll have to be the one to listen to her complaints later. I'll cover the cost of her drunken consolation drinks.”

Kiriko only confided in Minaho or Noike. She shared serious concerns and ongoing grievances about Seto with Minaho, whom she also regarded as an older sister. With Noike, who faced similar circumstances, she discussed everyday matters like friends would over drinks. Ever since they bonded over Mihoshi, the two had clicked. Several times a year, they’d bring food and drinks to each other's private spaces and let loose, thoroughly venting their daily frustrations.

“Understood.”

“Heh heh heh. Still, you sure do attract the worst kind of people, Seina-dono.” Saying this, Washu glanced at Seto.

Noticing the look, Seto smiled back, as if to say, “Same here.”

“Hmph… Hey, Seto-dono. Just to confirm one more time, you're sure about this?”

“Did you find out something through the Astral Link?”

“That’s a secret.”

“How sneaky of you, Goddess-sama.”

“The chances are close to zero, so I don't think there's anything to worry about… Well, maybe next time you'll adopt Kiriko-dono?” She said as she glanced at Noike.

Noike had been sent to watch over Tenchi's house, where an immense concentration of military power was gathered. This suggested the same could happen at Seina's place.

“I see… That sounds interesting in its own way. Proceed as planned, Washu-chan, with your full hobby mode engaged.”

“I knew you'd say that. I'm thinking of giving this one a different concept from Ryo-Ohki.

Well, look forward to it.”

Just as Washu said that, the doorbell leading to the Masaki residence chimed, and Sasami popped her head out.

“Noike-nee-chan. Are you done talking? It's almost lunchtime…” Sasami said timidly, stopping at the doorway.

“Meow!”

Ryo-Ohki, perched on Sasami's shoulder, suddenly darted toward Washu as if sensing something.

“Ryo-Ohki!”

“It's fine, we're done talking now.” Washu beckoned to Sasami, who tried to stop Ryo-Ohki.

At the same time, Seto smiled warmly and nodded.

“Grandma, are you busy again today?” Sasami ran over to Washu and the others, looking at Seto with eyes that seemed almost pleading.

“We can spend lunch together.”

“Really? That's great. So, Ryo-Ohki…?”

Sasami noticed Ryo-Ohki clinging to Washu's shoulder and looking at something, and her gaze was fixed on Washu's crystallized shoulder.

“Washu-nee… What happened to your shoulder?” Sasami peered fearfully at Washu's crystallized shoulder.

Washu smiled warmly, as if to ease Sasami's unease.

“I'm building a new ship soon. This girl is its core.”

“So, like Ryo-chan? But whose ship will it be?”

“Myaa! Myaa!”

“No, Ryo-Ohki. This one hasn't been born yet and doesn't know who you are.”

Washu peeled Ryo-Ohki away from the crystal, where she was meowing, and handed her to Sasami. Sasami held the squirming Ryo-Ohki tightly and stroked her head to calm her.

“This child will become Seina-dono's vessel. But keep it a secret from everyone else for now.”

"Meow! Meow!"
"No, Ryo-Ohki.
This one hasn't been born yet,
it doesn't know who you are."
Washu peeled Ryo-Ohki off and handed her to Sasami.

"Okay, I understand. But I see… That's why we couldn't eat together for so long, because you were creating this child."

"I'll can transfer it to the egg today, so starting tomorrow, we can eat together again."

"Okay!"

"Noike-dono, I'm fine here. Please help Sasami prepare the meal."

"Understood. Shall we go then, Sasami-chan?"

Sasami and Noike walked back to the living room together. After seeing them out the door, Washu staggered to her feet.

"I'll walk you there." Seto swiftly approached Washu's side, supporting her body by holding her under the arm.

"…What a bother. This is easier." With that, she lifted Washu up and carried her down the stairs.

## Chapter Three: Joint Exercise Trip

Two months after the Miki incident, Seina's second Bio-Enhancement adjustment training had finished, and without any major incidents since, he was living peacefully. Although life at Amane's penthouse had its share of strange tension and odd twists and turns, a certain set of rules had emerged and things were stable. This was because Gyokuren had surprisingly readily accepted Kiriko's suggestion that she "intentionally avoid being alone with Seina," which was the biggest concern, and had faithfully adhered to it.

Occasional interruptions from Airi, Amane's parents, friends trying to visit her house under various pretexts, and even NB's occasional odd behavior all fell within the bounds of everyday life there.

(But I seem to have forgotten someone…)

Seina occasionally thought this, but deliberately chose not to pursue it. For the current Seina, it wasn't something worth worrying about.

That night, Seina sat in the living room, intently studying the pamphlet NB was displaying.

"What are you looking at?"

Amane, Kiriko, and Elma peered curiously over Seina's shoulder as he happily studied the pamphlet.

"Oh, it's a joint space training pamphlet. You looked so happy, I thought you were watching something… naughty."

"Watching something like that…!!" Seina turned to look at Amane but quickly looked back to the pamphlet.

"I wasn't looking, I wasn't looking!"

Right there, almost touching Seina's cheek, was something far more intense than any racy image: Amane's ample bosom, threatening to spill out of her tank top.

"Come to think of it, Seina-chan's practical training in space starts tomorrow, doesn't it?"

Kiriko, who in the past would have immediately noticed Seina's unusual behavior and warned Amane, remained calm as she peered at the pamphlet. Whether she had become desensitized to it over the past few months or simply grown accustomed to it was unclear.

"Are you all set then?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. All that's left is to take NB tomorrow."

"Master. I'm not a thing. You don't take me along, you bring me along."

"Ah, sorry, sorry." Seina patted NB's head as if he were a dog.

“But Kiriko-san, isn't it a problem if Seina-kun goes into space?”

“Oh, don't worry. Even though we're going to space, we're only going to a remote, empty area. And I, who have a zero encounter rate, will be accompanying him as an instructor. So just relax, he’ll be on a big ship.”

“Huh… zero encounter rate. That's impressive.”

“Heh, maybe there will be an Amane-sama raid or something.” Like a gag from a stage play, Gyokuren, who was passing through the living room, muttered.

“Damn it!” Kiriko responded by glaring at Amane.

“…Only Gyokuren or Airi-sama would do something like that.”

“Oh, what a waste. When no one else is around is precisely the chance…” Before Gyokuren could finish, Karen silently dragged her into another room.

“Ahahahaha. It seems to be Amane-san's good fortune versus Seina-kun's bad luck, wouldn't you say?” Elma's smile was carefree as she watched this amazing teamwork, but her expression also showed strong interest. If there was another pirate attack, it would prove that Seina's abilities were genuine.

“Well, at least we're told an escort ship will be attached.”

“An escort ship? You don't mean an Imperial Ship, do you?”

“No way… I didn't get the details, but it's probably a GP ship, right? Hey, Kiriko?”

“Probably. I heard they're adjusting patrol schedules so nearby patrol ships can rush to the scene quickly if anything happens… But that doesn't mean you can slack off, Seina-chan.”

“Yes!”

“Still, if nothing happens, this training gets pretty monotonous and boring.”

“This isn't a field trip. An instructor shouldn't say things like that… But, well, you're right. I don't really have any particular impressions either.” Kiriko said with a slightly wry smile, gently admonishing Amane.

If even serious Kiriko reacted like this, the training must be incredibly monotonous… but…

“Just being able to go into space is exciting enough. Back on Earth, I never imagined that I'd ever get to go into space at all.”

“Is that all it takes?”

“Just being able to go into space is fun, huh… I'd forgotten that feeling.”

“Plus, since it's with everyone in my class, it feels kind of like a school trip, and I'm really looking forward to it.” Seina said happily, looking back at the pamphlet.

“Yeah, I guess in that sense it was fun. We had Mihoshi, the class clown, too.”

“Huh? Mihoshi-san was in our class?”

“Kiriko too, you know. But if Seina knows Mihoshi, you can probably imagine it, right?”

“…Yeah, sort of.”

There must have been a lot of trouble. And it wasn't Mihoshi herself who was affected, but other people.

“The worst one was when we mixed up the contents of the separate cooking pots for the communal meal. Remember, Kiriko?”

“I remember… That weird, suspicious stew, right? It looked so awful, you'd never want to eat it.”

“Exactly. But it smelled fine, so I tried a little taste, and it turned out surprisingly good. I think it got the most votes in the survey, right?”

“That's because it was a kid-friendly dish with strong flavors.” Kiriko must have been really upset, because she said it with a sullen expression.

“I remember, I remember. You looked so frustrated, Kiriko. Ahahahaha~~”

“Of course I was! I lost to some weird thing that just happened by accident!”

Skills honed over years of practice, defeated by a fluke. Seina understood Kiriko's frustration all too well.

“Do we have to cook our own meals during joint training?”

“Hm? …Oh, there's training where we perform tasks manually if the machines break down. Cooking meals is one of those things.”

“We'll get detailed explanations on-site, so let's leave it at that. Seina-chan. You have an early start tomorrow, so go take a bath and get some rest.”

“Yes.” Seina picked up NB and headed back to his room.

The next morning, after an early breakfast, Seina headed to GP Academy with Kiriko. Amane, who was supervising the training, had arrived at work about two hours earlier than Seina to make final confirmations.

After Kenneth, Rajau, and their classmates finished exchanging greetings in the classroom, an announcement was made over the intercom to gather at a designated location, and Seina and the others headed to the grounds by the sea. There, the female students had already gathered and were lining up.

“Whoa!”

When the male students saw the female students, a murmur like a sigh arose, and unexpectedly, the female students also sent them affectionate looks.

“This is the first time we've all gathered here since the entrance ceremony.” Rajau remarked thoughtfully, gazing at the girls.

“Even though it's a co-ed school, there are no classes with female students. It's a bit of a lie. Being all-male is more relaxed, but it's not as glamorous.”

“This joint training is mixed gender, so we have to make the most of this opportunity.”

“Heh heh! I've thoroughly checked the student roster I worked so hard to get! Now it's just a matter of making my move on the promising female students before the others do.” Kenneth said excitedly, clenching his fist.

(It's supposed to be joint training, but from what I hear, it sounds more like a mixer.) Seina looked around with a wry smile.

Most of the boys seemed to be thinking the same thing as Kenneth and Rajau, and were excitedly looking at the girls. The girls, in turn, seemed to be paying attention to the boys. But Seina's eyes were drawn to the training ship anchored offshore.

(That thing can actually float, after all.)

The training ship, likely around four hundred meters long, looked like two skyscrapers laid side by side. Of course, Seina had seen massive ships countless times since coming to GP Academy and in videos, but nothing compared to the sheer impact of seeing one in person.

“All students, fall in!”

At the sudden command, the students reflexively fell into formation and saluted toward the front.

“Ah!”

Seeing the figures on the large screen floating ahead, Seina couldn't help but gasp. There stood Tennan Seiryo, and behind him, a displeased-looking Amane.

“It's been quite a while. I heard he was missing, but he's alive after all.”

“Or rather, wouldn't a teacher normally get fired for missing this many days? Is it because he’s from the Tennan family?”

“Apparently, it's classified as force majeure under the Tennan Special Exemption.” Rajau activated a small monitor and checked the GP Academy homepage.

(Whoa, Amane-san… no, Amane-sensei looks really pissed off.)

Amane, visible behind Seiryo, was desperately holding back the urge to punch him.

(So that's what I was forgetting… it was Tennan-sensei…)

“What's wrong, Seina?” Kenneth looked puzzled at Seina, who was smiling bitterly.

“Seina-kun has quite the history with Tennan-sensei.”

“Hah, come to think of it, that did happen. But I've had Bio-Enhancement now, so it's no problem.”

“But if Seina-kun remains under surveillance, our actions as teammates will also draw attention. If things go badly, even our private time…”

“On the other hand, if Seina keeps getting attention, we can use that to our advantage.”

“I see… so we'd use him as bait.”

“Well, I guess that's fine.”

Hearing it stated so matter-of-factly was refreshing in a way. Besides, rather than Seina's bad luck being feared blindly, it felt easier to have it recognized as a clear phenomenon and discuss countermeasures or ways to use it.

“If there's a girl you're interested in, Seina-kun, I might have a different plan.”

“Hey, hey, Seina lives with Amane-sensei and Kiriko-sensei. He's not going to be interested in some little girl his own age now. Right, Seina?”

“Uh, yeah. I'll help out as much as I can too.” Seina answered with a wry smile after Kenneth made that definitive statement.

Honestly, Seina was interested in the female students his age too. But if he did anything weird and Amane found out, Kiriko would definitely hear about it too.

(That would be a disaster. Besides, we're going into space. We need to stay focused or it could be dangerous.) Seina took a deep breath and began to focus on what the teachers were saying.

At the same time Seina and his class were attending morning assembly, the intelligence gathering ship “Natsuki,” belonging to Seto's 13th Sentinel Fleet, was docked in the satellite orbit of the Academy's home planet. Capable of conducting solo intelligence gathering deep within enemy territory, this vessel possessed not only the latest intelligence sensors but also stealth capabilities, high maneuverability to evade enemy encirclement, and formidable combat power. It was a truly versatile combat ship, even capable of serving as a fleet flagship when necessary.

On the bridge of the Natsuki stood Minaho, Hakuren, and Tsurashima, a middle-aged man

who was effectively in charge of the ship.

“It is an immense honor to see the renowned Yamada Seina-dono with my own eyes.” After saying this, Tsurashima glanced briefly at Hakuren and continued, his voice carrying a note of relief. “Thank you for summoning my ship, Minaho-sama.”

“Relieved it wasn't Gyokuren?” Minaho said with a wry smile.

“…Well, frankly, yes. Utsutsumi-sama's Thirteenth Sentinel Fleet rarely moves, so we're bored out of our minds… I was delighted when the call came, but upon hearing it was to escort Yamada Seina-dono, the crew and I were a bit uneasy.”

It was standard procedure for Seto's Ladies-in-Waiting to serve as captains when the Sentinel Fleet's intelligence ships engaged in operations. Naturally, Hakuren and the others had each boarded this ship several times for training. And when Gyokuren served as captain… well, various interpersonal disasters occurred.

"Oh, Tsurashima-dono. There is no way she would do something that would cause the destruction of this valuable ship."

“That may be so, Minaho-sama. But it took a full year of major personnel changes and training to get it back to this state.”

It must have been incredibly tough. Tsurashima forgot Hakuren was there and vented to Minaho.

“I truly apologize.” Hakuren hung her head dejectedly, bowing deeply to Tsurashima.

“Ahh! No, no, it wasn't Hakuren-sama's fault… More importantly, how long will Minaho-sama be accompanying us?”

“It's wrong to bully young girls.”

“Kuh… That tone of yours is starting to resemble Seto-sama's.”

This was Tsurashima's second slip of the tongue today.

After morning assembly, the first-year students boarded the training ship that was anchored offshore and lined up in the outer starboard passageway where they could see the outside.

“Ah…!”

Seina noticed faculty members seeing them off from the top level of the boarding passageway, at the same height as the training ship's outer perimeter walkway. Though they were about three hundred meters away, Bio-Enhancement allowed him to see the teachers' expressions clearly.

“Kiriko-san… Elma-san too.”

Kiriko, Elma, and Mikami were there too. As Kiriko and the others smiled warmly and saluted, the training ship began to move.

“All hands, salute!”

At Seiryo's command, all the students saluted.

“Ah, Elma-san! It's time for a brief farewell, but… I will definitely… return to you…!” Rajau felt so moved that he waved at Elma, who looked away with tears in her eyes.

“It's just training, yet he's being so dramatic.”

“That's unusual for Rajau,”

Seina and the others couldn't help but smile wryly at Kenneth's words, but then they noticed the sniffles coming from all around.

“Ahh, Kiriko-sensei! Though we part for a while… I will surely… come to you…!”

Many male students were teary-eyed, saying things similar to what Rajau had just said.

“…Oh, it's the Kiriko-sensei fan club.”

“Is that kind of thing popular?”

“Bittersweet farewells are part of the journey.”

Just as the students were lost in emotion,

“Hey! You lot, get back to your rooms immediately and stand by. Run!”

Seiryo's voice boomed, shattering the silence like a truck suddenly crashing into the dormitory. Wielding a shock baton resembling a bamboo sword, he began scattering the students still savoring the farewell's lingering emotion.

“Hurry up! Hurry up! Hurry up!”

Driven by his voice, the students moved to their assigned rooms downstairs.

“Oh dear, I was really enjoying myself… But even so, that teacher is still the same as always.” Rajau smiled wryly, checked the room number and opened the door.

“But I never thought he’d be the captain this time… I guess we’ll have a strategy meeting with the others later.” Kenneth entered the room and immediately collapsed onto his bed, stretching out.

“……This ship still has the old-style rooms, huh?”

“Training ships are made up of decommissioned vessels, so it's unlikely to change anytime soon.” Rajau sat down at his station and promptly activated the terminal monitor.

“Well, complaining about luxuries won't help. More importantly, have you figured out the ship's layout?”

“…Going directly to the female students' quarters is impossible, as expected. It seems we'll have to go via the dedicated entrance, the cafeteria, and the outer perimeter corridor. But I heard from a senior that female students also come out to the upper cafeteria and the outer perimeter corridor during break times, so that's probably where we'll have to approach them. Well, the curriculum is co-ed, so if we can manage to get into the same group as our target girl…”

“There'll be too much competition during break time, and group assignments are pure luck! We need to find a way to talk to them directly before training starts…”

“But direct communication is blocked too.”

“Direct communication is possible.” NB, who hadn't said a word up until then, suddenly noted.

“What? Really, Seina's NB?!”

“This is the first time I've seen Seina-kun's NB talk, but it's an unusual setup.” Rajau peered at the NB with interest.

Kenneth pushed Rajau aside and leaned closer to NB. “That doesn't matter. Seina's NB-kun, is that story true?”

“You guys should read the pamphlet properly. I'm sure Master already knows, right?”

“You mean the thing in the pamphlet where if you swap one of the two ID tags that came with it, you can only communicate with that person?”

“Exactly. Here, read this part.” Saying that, NB activated the pamphlet Seina had been looking at the day before.

“…Ah, you're right, that's what it says!”

“Who reads pamphlets like this normally… But what does that mean?”

“Probably because it's better than having people try to break into the girls' block.”

“But in the end, it's impossible unless we know someone, right? Hey, Seina, can't your NB to connect with the girls' block?”

“I’m not omnipotent. There’s not enough time to try to take the initiative. I give up.”

“No choice. We'll just have to narrow down the targets as much as possible.”

“Narrow it down, you say…”

“We could get something from the class groupings. Showing you guys the data would be

risky if we got caught, but if you input the target list, we could prioritize it?”

“Whoa! That's Seina's NB-kun for you! Let's get right on it.”

Kenneth pulled out a memory plate and offered it to NB. NB's extended a tentacle-like arm and grabbed it.

“……Huh? Hey, Kenneth-san, this data looks like it's from when you enrolled. I'll run a search with the latest data.”

“Latest? What do you mean?”

“Some of them quit GP Academy, others didn't enter. Oh, and some of them have already exchanged tags…”

“Hold on a second! They wouldn't have had the chance to meet or the time to exchange tags!”

“They could've been dating before enrollment, or bumped into each other by chance in town on a day off. The pamphlets were distributed a week ago, so there was time to exchange tags beforehand.”

Several lists, adjusted so only Kenneth could see their contents, appeared before him. Rajau and Seina couldn't see which female students were displayed there, but the faintly translucent plates were visible to them too.

“Alright, let's start by eliminating the ones we can't pursue~~”

The moment NB said that, Kenneth's carefully curated list of female students vanished before their eyes like blocks in a game of Breakout.

“Huh? Whaaat?! Wait, wait, wait!” Kenneth screamed.

Before his eyes, the momentum showed no sign of stopping, and the last monitor was almost completely gone.

“Noooooooooo… No way. My dream…” Faced with this cruel reality, Kenneth collapsed onto the floor.

But just when it seemed the entire list would vanish, one single entry remained.

“Ah, Kenneth-kun, it looks like one's left behind!” Rajau pointed at the monitor, now reduced to a small block.

“What!?” Kenneth sprang to his feet. The moment he saw the list, he began to tremble. Then, striking a huge victory pose, he thrust his fist toward the ceiling.

“Yes! The first target remains! We did it, we did it!”

His joy was as if he'd just secured a tag exchange with that girl. But the very next moment,

that last list vanished too.

“…Wh-what the hell just happened!?”

“Damn. That girl started communicating with someone else too. I'm sorry.”

“No way…” Kenneth collapsed onto the bed, flopping down like a poster peeling off a wall.

Kiriko maintained her salute until the training ship vanished beyond the clouds.

“Come back safely, Seina-kun.” Kiriko, murmured anxiously.

Mikami watched with a gentle smile.

“This voyage will be important for both Seina-kun and the GP, won't it?”

“Yes… Speaking of which, I've been wondering—I don't see Airi-sama anywhere…”

Kiriko looked at the large, out-of-place garbage bin placed in the corner of the passageway with an expression that screamed “This is super weird!”

“Ho ho ho. Last night, the secretaries discovered Airi-sama trying to stowing away on the training ship. We thought we should at least let her see them off…” Mikami slowly looked toward the trash bin, from which faint sobs could be heard.

“Predictable behavior patterns are Airi-sama's weakness, ho ho ho. That's quite enough now.” As Mikami spoke, several of Airi's secretaries approached from the farewell line.

“We apologize for the trouble.” Bowing deeply, they roughly grabbed the plastic garbage can and departed.

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Meanwhile, in the same satellite orbit, Airi's daughter, Minaho, sat crouched in a corner of the bridge, tears welling in her eyes.

“You're starting to resemble Seto-sama… Seto-sama…”

For Minaho, those words terrified her more than any other. She had always longed for the ordinary happiness any woman desired. Yet the position of Seto's right-hand woman carried such formidable power that even the boldest men shied away from it. Still, she couldn't abandon her duties until someone capable of assisting Seto in her place appeared. And above all, even if that time came, if she became imbued with Seto's patterns of behavior, it would be the same thing.

“Well, um, Seto-sama's words and actions are so distinctive that those close to her inevitably become influenced by them… However, Minaho-sama, despite holding the position of Seto-sama's right-hand woman, hasn't really been affected to that extent. Among us, she's known as the… damn it… no, excuse me… Seto-sama's conscience.”

“…Really?” Minaho looked up at Tsurashima with teary eyes and a childlike expression.

“Absolutely! Right, Hakuren-sama?”

“Yes, Tsurashima-dono is correct. But Minaho-sama, we still need to rendezvous with the training ship Seina-sama is aboard. So it's about time…”

“Yes, tears aren't good for seeing someone off.” Minaho wiped her tears and stood up, heading toward the window where the Academy's home planet was visible.

Watching her, Tsurashima and Hakuren exchanged glances and breathed sighs of relief.

Although it was a training ship, there was real work happening, with each department head having a chief. The fifty teachers who had boarded to supervise the students were divided into teams of several people, and they were holding meetings with their department heads to discuss student guidance. Meanwhile, on the bridge, Seiryo stood on a platform before the saluting operators, surveying the area with satisfaction.

“Gentlemen! I am Tennan Seiryo, appointed as captain of this ship for this training exercise!”

In stark contrast to Seiryo, who began his address with a delighted expression, Amane stood beside him looking thoroughly displeased.

(Why the hell do I have to be a bridge officer with this idiot?!)

The reason they were paired together was because other teachers refused to partner with Seiryo. The direct cause was his seemingly excessive guidance toward Yamada Seina during his initial enrollment. Of course, Seiryo had the Tennan Special Provision, which allowed for quite forceful intervention. However, in reality, it was difficult to use force against someone connected to the Tennan family. Therefore, Amane Kaunaq was chosen to monitor Seiryo's excesses. She knew him well, wouldn't hesitate to invoke the Tennan Special Provision, and had also become Yamada Seina's Bio-Enhancement supervisor. Normally, Seiryo's prolonged unauthorized absence would have made him subject to dismissal. However, it was proven that the direct cause was deliberate sabotage by others. Furthermore, an apology and a

substantial donation were received from the Tennan conglomerate, resulting in him being granted a probationary period.

The operators, who had been growing weary of Seiryo's lengthy speech bordering on bragging, perked up the moment Seiryo finished and Amane took the stage. They welcomed Amane with applause as she stepped onto the podium to replace Seiryo.

Responding to them, Amane flashed her most radiant smile and said, “I am Amane Kaunaq, serving as the First Officer. It's a pleasure to meet you all.”

After this concise self-introduction, Amane wasted no time and immediately stepped down from the stage.

“Welcome aboard, First Officer.”

Operators holding bouquets rushed forward to welcome Amane.

“We are deeply honored to have the 'Zero Goddess' aboard!”

“Ah, thank you.”

A slightly flustered Amane was taken by the hand by a female operator and led to the captain's chair at the center.

“Isn't this the wrong place?”

“This is fine.”

Everyone nodded in agreement with the smiling female operator. Left behind, Seiryo cleared his throat loudly and pushed his way between the operators.

“Where might my seat be? Hmph, not to brag, but… I am also a high-ranking member with a low attack rate…”

“We are aware. That is precisely why we have specially prepared the captain's seat for you.”

The operators pointed in unison toward a scaffold erected at the rear of the bridge. Covered in red and white cloth, it was decorated with flashy yet cheap-looking artificial flowers. A large banner reading “Captain's Seat” was attached.

“Oh! That's not bad at all!” Saying that, Seiryo climbed up the scaffold.

“…It was meant to be a little joke, but—”

The operators stared dumbstruck at Seiryo, who had climbed the scaffold and was now excitedly looking around.

“Well, they say fools and smoke always rise to the top. If he likes it, why not just leave it?” Amane coldly declared before taking her seat at the captain's console. “Right then, we'll be at the outer ring soon. Leave the fool be and get back to work.”

The massive outer ring was visible to the naked eye directly before Amane.

The training ship arrived at the outer ring and began connecting to a large container containing a gigantic training facility that was over 500 meters in length.

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“Well then, Hakuren, Tsurashima-dono, I'll leave the rest to you.”

After seeing off the training ship, which had connected the container and immediately launched toward outer space, Minaho disembarked from the ship.

“Then we'll depart as well.”

Once Minaho's small craft had moved a sufficient distance away, Natsuki launched in pursuit of the training ship.

The large container connected to the training ship was actually used as a small-scale relay station. Most of the facilities installed inside the container were related to delivery operations. Every process was automated, and in reality, the parts requiring human intervention—including monitoring and maintenance—were virtually nonexistent. However, due to the nature of its organization, the GP frequently operated in pirate-infested or dangerous zones. This meant the likelihood of encountering emergencies, such as mechanical failures, were significantly higher compared to other companies. Therefore, for training purposes, most of the automation functions in this facility had been removed, and it was adjusted to allow operations to be performed manually.

“…In other words, this is training to prepare for situations where operations must be carried out manually in an emergency.”

Seiryo was projected onto a large monitor and speaking from the top of the tower in front of the students who had gathered in the cafeteria/auditorium.

“Now, time is short. Please begin your training immediately, following the instructions of your assigned instructor.”

Amane cut in during Seiryo's pause and quickly wrapped up the conversation.

“Everyone stand up! Run to your assigned work blocks!”

The students obeyed the teachers' commands and began moving in an orderly fashion. Then, NB moved away from Seina.

“Master, I'll be waiting in the room, so do your best.”

“Aren't you going with me?”

“You're not a child, you'll be fine on your own, right?”

“Of course, but… you're supposed to be my assistant during missions, right? Kiriko-san told me to always take you with me.”

“Now, now, Seina-kun. Not every regular GP member carries an NB, and you're used to life here now, aren't you? In your case, Seina-kun, you were specially assigned because you came from an early-level civilization. I don't think you need to be so rigid about it. Besides, the ship is just like home.”

“I guess you're right.”

“Call me if anything happens.” With that, NB left the mess hall.

“Alright then, Seina-kun. I'm sorry to ask, but please help me get Kenneth-kun up.”

Rajau grabbed Kenneth's arm, still slumped over the desk, while Seina seized his other arm. Coordinating their movements, they forcibly pulled Kenneth to his feet. Then they started running after the team ahead.

“Hey, what's up with you, Kenneth?”

The team right behind Seina and the others whispered to them. Rajau hesitated for a moment, unsure if he should explain the reason, but then closed the gap with the team behind them and began to speak.

“…Actually, Kenneth-kun's list of those female students… they were all wiped out.”

“Total annihilation? Hey, what's that supposed to mean? What does that mean?”

The student nearly shouted aloud, then quickly covered his mouth. Though the supervising teacher didn't notice, it drew the attention of everyone in Seina's group.

“Totally wiped out? You mean you already approached them? How?”

This time, the student running ahead of Seina and the others approached, still facing forward.

“Everyone, have you read the pamphlets you received all the way through?”

At Rajau's question, everyone shook their heads. But several of them were clearly late in doing so.

(I see… So those few are the ones who exchanged tags.)

Rajau, continued with a wry smile. “Within this ship, you can't even communicate with the girls' living quarters, let alone go there. But actually, it was mentioned in the pamphlet—those who exchanged one of the attached ID tags can communicate with each other.”

“What?! What kind of… Guh!!”

Students nearby quickly covered the mouth of the student who nearly shouted out loud.

When the teacher, suspicious, turned around, they saw everyone running in an orderly fashion in silence. When the teacher turned back to face forward, the students listened intently as Kenneth explained.

“…Actually, Seina-kun's NB accessed the ship's computer and, looking at the latest student list and communication records, identified the female students who had already exchanged tags.”

“So, when you compared it, Kenneth's list was wiped out.”

“Hey, show us that student roster and the tag exchange data list. Since you've brought it up here, you're not trying to hide it, right?”

“We haven't seen the data directly. NB only checked Kenneth-kun's personal list within a range deemed relatively safe. So all we know is the fact that the female students listed were all wiped out.”

“Didn't it check out Rajau and Seina too? Ah, I see. Seina doesn't need to make a list like that.”

Everyone nodded at their classmate's words. But their interest immediately shifted to Rajau's answer.

“So, what about you, Rajau?”

“Well, I saw Kenneth-kun myself. I didn't have the courage to ask him to check. Tag exchanger information is a privacy issue, so that's impossible, but I can provide a list of students who withdrew, took leave of absence, or never enrolled. Beyond that…”

“Negotiate directly with Kenneth, then.”

Even if they were only a part of the whole, every female student on Kenneth's list was a tag exchanger.

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“…Huh.”

A few minutes after starting to run, while climbing the long staircase to the workshop, Seina suddenly murmured with admiration.

“What is it?”

“Carrying Kenneth up these stairs without getting winded… I guess I finally feel like I really did get Bio-Enhancement…”

“That's wonderful. Bio-Enhancement gives immediate results. But right now, I wish there was a way to enhance the mind too.” Rajau said with a puzzled expression, looking at Kenneth's drained face.

“That must have been a big shock for you, Kenneth.”

“He was so dedicated to planning it all… He poured a lot of resources into getting the information, too.”

“Poor guy…”

“Hard work doesn't necessarily lead to results. But it's precisely because of hard work that results are sweet. And sometimes the effort is more enjoyable than the results. At least Kenneth-kun looked happy and having a great time while he was working hard.”

“I see… Maybe you're right. Still, I wish things had worked out for him.”

“It all comes down to perspective, I suppose.”

“Alright! This is where you'll be training.”

The supervising teacher stopped at the top of the stairs. The students fell into line behind him, closing ranks and forming an orderly column. By this time, Kenneth had finally recovered enough to walk unaided.

“The officer in charge will brief you now! All turn right and fall in line!”

At the teacher's command, everyone turned right and fell into line with perfect, synchronized movement. Kenneth, barely able to stand, managed to turn his head sideways without the teacher noticing, thanks to the help of Seina, Rajau, and the friends standing near him.

“Hello, everyone…”

A young woman, smiling brightly, began her introduction.

“Wow! The woman is definitely older!!”

Instantly, Kenneth's body tensed up like a balloon filled with air. His expression was suddenly full of life, his eyes shining brightly, as if everything that had happened before was a lie.

“……You're back to life, Kenneth.”

“Well, the question is when he'll realize she's married.”

“Huh?”

Seina quicklyly looked at the woman's hand as she explained. There was no ring on her finger, but Seina immediately realized that rings were an Earth custom.

“Hey, how did you know she's married?”

“It's the same as with Kaunaq-sensei and Masaki-sensei. There's this list of beautiful female staff members kept by the male GP staff. I remember seeing her on the married list… Of

course, Kenneth-kun should know about it too… Well, anyway, since he's feeling better now, let's just call it good.”

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Ten minutes later, Seina and the others were working on their training.

Their job involved checking the delivery destinations of packages and stamping them with a hammer-like device to mark them as confirmed. Packages that had passed the contents check were continuously loaded onto a conveyor belt-like system, flowing down from above.

“This feels more like a part-time job than training.”

“But it's easy, isn't it?” Rajau said to Seina, who looked a little dissatisfied, while stamping the packages.

“Besides, if it were too hard, it'd be tough for Kenneth-kun to keep up.”

Sure enough, before work started, Kenneth—who had just realized the training instructor was married—sat silently across from Rajau, stamping like a machine. Perhaps because the initial shock had been so severe, while his mind was clear, his energy was completely drained. Occasionally, he even tried to stamp items that had been intentionally mixed in as delivery errors.

“Whoops!”

Rajau reached out lightly with his left hand and caught the handle of the stamp Kenneth was about to press.

The training ship's bridge featured a massive atrium structure, divided into an upper section that seemed to float in the air—housing the captain's chair and navigation operators—and a lower section where other crew members performed their duties. Down below were Alan, Barry, and Cohen—the Ryoko Balta fan club members who had been caught fleeing after indulging their selfish desires.

“Hey… Alan. Did you see the roster of cadets aboard?”

“Yeah… Seina was on it…”

“What if we get attacked by pirates again…”

“Well, it should be fine. After all, the Zero Goddess is with us this time…” Alan said, looking up at the upper deck.

“Plus, there's a bonus.”

Peeking out from the crow's nest protruding from the upper bridge, Seiryo could be seen

occasionally sticking his head out and looking around.

“It's fine, it's fine!”

His utter goofiness eased the tension among Alan and the others.

“But a pirate attack could be an opportunity, if you look at it the right way.”

“What do you mean, Alan?”

“If we could discover a new idol pirate to replace Ryoko-sama, we could form a new fan club and perhaps bring back those glorious days?”

“Oh! That would free us from this debt hell!”

“Let's do it right this time.”

Alan and the others began discussing plans as if they were pondering what to do with lottery tickets they hadn't even bought. But they became so engrossed in their discussion that they completely forgot their duties. And they missed the warning signs in the readings indicating an abnormality in the main reactor.

At the parcel inspection station, the boys were moving packages that had already been sorted to their destinations into the warehouse.

Seina loaded a package as large as a wardrobe case onto a large lift cart, immediately jumped into the open-air driver's seat, and set the cart in motion. After about ten minutes, he returned with the empty cart and began loading more packages.

“It's not like we're racing, but that Seina sure is going all out, huh?” The neighboring team, waiting for the lift cart that was taking its time returning, called out.

“He says he used to do a lot of unloading and loading at his family’s store. Plus, he wants to get it done while the lift cart is still running smoothly.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“Seina-kun says his family car runs poorly when he drives it. He also mentions feeling the effects of his Bio-Enhancement, but he's basically just serious about it.”

Thanks to Seina's enthusiasm, his team had almost finished moving all their cargo. They were just one more trip away from wrapping up. But over thirty percent of the cargo remained at the other teams' locations.

“Hmm… So that means Kenneth isn't serious, huh?”

Kenneth, still reeling from the shock, sat slumped behind some boxes.

“Well, he'll get back on track after lunch,” Rajau said with a wry smile.

Just then, a ringing bell-like sound echoed, and the ship's announcement began.

“Students, lunch will be ready shortly. Students who have completed their morning classes should begin eating lunch in the cafeteria. I repeat…”

“What?! Seriously?”

Their stomachs were already growling, but the work would take at least another thirty minutes. Screams of despair erupted from all the other teams.

“Seina-kun, nice work!”

Seeing Seina's lift cart just returning to the delivery floor, Rajau clenched his fist.

“So far, there are no problems with the training program … I joined as an instructor, but it's still boring.”

Amane had finished an early lunch at the officers' table in the cafeteria with several female bridge operators and was chatting before the students arrived.

“First Officer Kaunaq, you know Yamada Seina-kun quite well, don't you? …So, what kind of person is he?”

From the kind of lighthearted chatter typical among ordinary friends, the operators finally steered the conversation toward the core topic. Though, in truth, what the operators really wanted to know wasn't about Yamada Seina, but about Amane Kaunaq's private life.

“Given my position, I can't discuss a student's personal matters, but he's a good kid. Very much so.”

“Ah, no, that's not what I meant…”

The operators' expressions showed a hint of disappointment. While they certainly couldn't pry into private matters, the chance to have a personal conversation with Amane Kaunaq, a super-famous celebrity, was extremely rare. The operators decided to go straight for it, without beating around the bush.

“Um, you know how First Officer Amane is this incredibly famous, stunningly beautiful person, yet you never hear about any male scandals involving her? Rumor has it that's because Captain Tennan is always around…”

“Exactly. But watching the two of them on this training trip, it's clear at least First Officer Amane has absolutely no interest in him…”

“So that's why it's Seina-kun?”

“Well, you see, First Officer Amane! She was originally a top-tier detective, then suddenly transferred to become a GP Academy instructor. Now she's in charge of the new students'

Bio-Enhancement training. Even if the students have guardians accompanying them, the fact they're living under the same roof is causing quite a stir. If Yamada Seina-kun were an adult, and if there weren't strict reporting restrictions from above, this would be major news!”

“Really?”

“You just say 'really?' so casually… Do you not realize you're a public figure, First Officer Amane?”

“Hold on, we're getting sidetracked here! But since we're on the subject, I'll just ask it straight out. What do you think of Yamada Seina-kun, First Officer Amane?”

“Teacher and student. Nothing more, nothing less. I was the reason… or rather, the cause that led Seina-kun to space. My demotion to GP Academy instructor was also because of that. Plus, it was to protect him from that idiot. That's all.”

“The reason he went into space?”

“No comment. It touches on classified matters.”

“But somehow, there's this rumor going around that it's not just a teacher-student relationship.”

“Honestly… People jump to conclusions about relationships, making it all about love and infatuation… It's such a bother. Where did that rumor even come from?”

“From First Officer Amane's parents.”

Thud! Amane, who had been about to rest her cheek on her hand, misjudged the distance and slammed her head hard onto the desk. Then, propelled by the momentum, she sprang to her feet and glared at the operators.

“Wh-what do you mean!?”

“I heard it mentioned at various social gatherings… A friend who works as a secretary for a GP executive told me.”

“Ah, that bastard old man! I'll beat him to a pulp!”

“Um… actually, the source of the information seems to be your mother…”

“Huh!?” Amane, who had been standing with clenched fists, slumped onto the table like a deflated balloon.

“Ugh! Mom's an idiot…”

“Such a straightforward parent-child dynamic. So, does that mean you feel something a little special for Yamada Seina-kun?” The operators, having found Amane's weakness, seized the moment to press their advantage.

“…… You know, the Kuramitsu family is famous for probability bias, right? You know about Mitoto-sama's cleaning, don't you?”

“Yes. I know about the people caught up in that. It really is strange, isn't it?”

“Mysterious?”

“Yeah. When it gets that extreme, it's practically occult stuff.”

“It's a bit scary, isn't it? Of course, the usual Mitoto-sama is kind and wonderful.”

“Strange, isn't it… You're quite right. Being at the Academy, it's easy to forget, but uncertainties like probability bias—even within the Galactic Federation—tend to elicit reactions like yours. So then, what about Seina-kun's case? What do you think of someone possessing a probability bias that is comparable to, or even more negative than Mitoto-sama's cleaning?”

“Well…”

“It's astonishing that such a child could remain good. Especially since he’s from an early-stage civilization, it's even more remarkable.”

“Ah!”

Even the girls at Galaxy Academy found the probability bias of Mitoto and Seina to be strange. Naturally, in remote areas, it was still considered a field of the occult in many places. Especially in areas still in the early stages of civilization, how would they be treated? Realizing this, the girls' faces clouded over a little. Setting aside how Amane felt about Seina, they could understand how difficult it must have been.

“I'm sorry for asking out of mere curiosity.”

“It's fine. But remember, the one most troubled by the probability bias is Seina-kun himself.”

“But doesn't it ever bother you to be around him, First Officer?”

“I don't mind Seina-kun's bad luck… or rather, lots of people who find it amusing gather around, so it's never boring.” Amane's expression softened into a gentle smile, her demeanor shifting abruptly from the boldness of moments before to something distinctly feminine.

The operators, captivated by her overwhelming feminine charm, blushed and found themselves transfixed, as if frozen in place.

“The students will be arriving soon, let's go.” Amane said, rising smoothly to her feet.

The students, having finished their work, rushed in just as the female staff members, dazed by Amane's allure, finally stood up and exited the cafeteria.

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Amane and the others were the last group to take turns eating. As they returned to the bridge they took their positions,

“Okay, time's up. Prepare for hyperspace jump!” Seiryo shouted from the bridge.

At that signal, the operators frantically began checking their respective departments.

“All clear. Initiating link with the escort ship… Link signal received!”

“Good! Load hyperspace program!”

Monitor screens indicating the loading of the program appeared one after another, and the view outside began to distort.

“Energy output rising to 120, 130, 135, 140…”

The training ship shifted out of phase with normal space and twisted away, disappearing.

“Program complete. Jump to hyperspace.. Natsuki, confirmed at four o'clock.”

“Good.”

Just as Seiryo crossed his arms, his hand slipped from the railing. The bridge shook violently, and Seiryo plummeted dramatically onto the lower deck.

“Status report!” Judging Captain Seiryo unable to perform his duties, Amane immediately shouted.

However, since no one on the bridge actually considered Seiryo the captain, they remained unperturbed by his fall and promptly proceeded with their tasks as Amane ordered.

“Engine output is plummeting. Main power reactors down. Currently operating solely on auxiliary engines.”

“Can't maintain hyperspace drive! Initiating hyperspace disengagement!”

“Engine room operators! Report!”

When there was no response to the operator's scream, “Security! Anomaly in the engine room operator. Check it!” Amane ordered the bridge security guard to investigate.

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On the lower bridge, Alan and the other two who should have been handling engine room operations had left their stations, pale and trembling.

“The engine pressure drop won't stop! What are we gonna do, Barry!?”

“What are you talking about?! It's because Alan didn't check the monitor properly!”

“This is bad! We'll get fired!”

“This is bad, Alan. If that happens, we won't be able to pay off our debts!”

“Calm down, calm down…” Alan tried to calm Barry and Cohen, who were on the verge of panic, while thinking of how to cover up this mess.

“Let's run, Alan!”

“…No wait!”

At that moment, Alan looked toward Seiryo, who had fallen from the upper bridge and was unconscious.

“Let's blame this on him! Hurry!”

Alan briefly explained the plan to them, then slammed the unconscious Seiryo hard against their monitor terminal. He then collapsed onto the floor, feigning unconsciousness. The very next moment, bridge security personnel rushed into Alan's booth.

A pirate reconnaissance craft was tracking the training ship that had appeared in normal space. In the vastness of space, it was close enough to be considered a near-miss.

“A GP ship… What a bunch of unlucky bastards.” Watching the training ship's footage sent from the scout ship, Komachi Kyō, the pirate ship's captain, muttered with a look of confusion.

“Should we sink it?”

“No, wait. The only ships lurking around here at this time of year are GP Academy training ships. The Guild and GP may be adversaries, but we're not at war. And besides, they're just kids.”

“But if we leave it like this…”

“Besides, it's right after that bastard Tarrant pulled that stupid stunt the other day. Stirring up unnecessary hostility isn't a wise move.”

“True. It's infuriating to be lumped in with the likes of Tarrant.”

“But the fact that their route is different from usual… No, wait a moment…” The operator began checking the newly transmitted data. “Hmm… The energy readings are unusually low. It might be engine trouble.”

“We have ample time before The Big Da Ruma arrives… Shall we proceed?”

“Not a bad target for a little extra cash. We'll just move them to a spot where they won't cause trouble while we're working.”

Bam! Komachi clapped her hands loudly. Taking that as their signal, her subordinates began preparing for the assault.

“Let's give these kids, the future of the GP, a good lesson in reality.”

“An abnormality has occurred on the training ship! The link has been severed!”

By the time the chief operator of the Natsuki reported this, the other operators had already begun preparing to execute multiple possible orders that might come from the captain.

“Prioritize tracking the training ship.” Without a moment's hesitation, Hakuren gave her orders quickly and succinctly.

“Tracking the training ship is prioritized, understood! Returning to normal space.”

Thud! With a great jolt, Natsuki materialized in normal space. But the moment it did, a faint noise appeared on the monitor.

“Is this a jamming vibration wave!?”

“What about the training ship?”

“Long-range communication is down, so we can't pinpoint its location. Due to the vibration wave, we couldn't acquire our own coordinates either.”

“Proceed with estimated provisional values! Can you pinpoint the vibration wave's source?”

“Unknown vessel approaching rapidly! It's a planetary-class ship!”

“That must be the source of the jamming vibration wave.”

“……”

Hakuren hesitated for an instant about attempting a hyperspace jump. They needed to rendezvous with the training ship as soon as possible, but under the influence of vibration waves of this magnitude, it carried the same risk as a random jump. Moreover, in a situation where even the precise current position couldn't be determined, it would be tantamount to suicide. However, leaving such an enormous, unidentified vessel unchecked was also undeniably dangerous. Therefore, even if it meant postponing the rendezvous with the training ship, it was necessary to confirm the identity of the giant vessel.

“…Match relative velocity with unidentified vessel! Identify its nature. Transition to First-Class Combat Readiness!”

Hakuren glanced toward Tsurashima and issued orders crisply.

The Natsuki began emergency acceleration, and even with inertial control, the G-forces were too great to be absorbed, but all the crew members remained motionless and carried

out their respective duties. The Natsuki matched speed with the approaching planet-class ship in the shortest possible time, requiring almost no velocity correction.

“Impressive…”

The operators, seeing the majestic appearance of the gigantic planet-scale ship before their very eyes, naturally sighed in admiration.

“Initiating intelligence gathering!”

With the operator's words, the planetary-scale ship's attack commenced.

In the training ship's mess hall, students and instructors worked together to clean up the dishes scattered by the shock of hyperspace exit.

“Oh man, I hadn't even finished half of mine…”

“We were just getting started!”

It was unfortunate that much of their lunch had been ruined and they now had to clean it up, but it also happened to be the catalyst for conversation between a boy and girl who had previously struggled to find the right moment to speak. The students began chatting in a friendly atmosphere.

By the time most of the cleanup was finished,

“Students, this is Tennan Seiryo, the esteemed captain of this vessel. Due to engine trouble, we are currently performing emergency repairs in normal space. All students are to await further instructions in their respective cabins. That is all.”

A broadcast explaining the situation came over the speakers, delivered by Seiryo, who had regained consciousness.

“Engine trouble?”

“Engine trouble, huh…”

“Engine trouble…”

Like an avalanche, the words spread among the students, and every student and teacher present turned to look at Seina.

“Ugh!” Seina stiffened as if frozen, but fortunately, their expressions were extremely calm.

× × ×

“Ugh… I caused trouble for everyone… But I guess it'll be okay?”

Seina and the others were in their room, eating portable meals resembling hamburgers that

had been issued to replace the food that had spilled on the floor.

“It's not like they're telling us to evacuate, so it's no big deal.”

Kenneth finished his ration quickly, tossed the trash into the dust chute, lay down on the bed, and stretched widely. The early morning and the accumulation of various shocks made him blink sleepily, on the verge of falling asleep.

“Maybe this is just another part of the training,”

“Could be. Maybe the next part is a pirate attack or something… Huh?”

Just as Kenneth relaxed and sank into bed, trying to resist sleepiness, the door opened and NB floated in.

“NB…! Where the hell were you!?”

“Hey, don't be like that. I'll show you something good.”

Brushing off an angry Seina, NB began operating a panel on the cabin wall. Immediately, split screens showing the women's changing room, shower room, and other areas appeared.

“Whoa——!” His sleepiness vanished instantly. Kenneth leapt out of bed and nearly bumped into the panel as he rushed closer.

“Hey, don't get so worked up. Back off a bit.”

Kenneth stepped back about a meter, sat on the floor, and stared intently at the screen. Rajau came over to sit beside him in the same position.

“Hey, is this footage from this ship?”

“Of course it's live footage.”

“Wh-what? Live footage?! …You didn't… you didn't secretly film this, did you?”

“Which one should we watch? I recommend this one.”

“You idiot! This is bad…!!”

Seina approached to stop NB, but Kenneth and Rajau suddenly jumped on him and pinned him down.

“Seina! We're friends, right? With my list of girls to talk to wiped out, I need this!”

“Seina-kun! What you're trying to do is right! But please understand—”

Kenneth and Rajau pleaded with teary eyes. Though their gaze remained fixed on the screen.

“Ohhhh!

One of the split monitors zoomed in, filling the screen with a scene of a female student in her underwear in the changing room, her hand on the clasp of her bra. Kenneth and Rajau abandoned Seina and clung to the panel.

“What about this one?”

But the next scene showed the boys' locker room.

“Ugh! What the hell are you showing?! Hey!!”

“Is this harassment?!”

Kenneth and Rajau, now genuinely tearful, yelled at NB.

“What, are you trying to find fault with my hobby?… Idiot, I told you it was a boy, didn’t I? … That's right! … As long as you're having fun, that's fine, so let's get back to the other…. So, what do you think?”

“Wooooooooo!”

The image abruptly switched back to the girls' changing room, and Kenneth and Rajau happily leaned closer to the screen again.

Seina peered at NB curiously. “Hey NB, isn't your speech a bit weird?”

“Weird? What do you mean? I'm just being myself.”

“It sounded like you were doing multiple roles by yourself. Like a rakugo storyteller.” **(TN: Traditional Japanese comic storytelling.)**

"Ugh! ... I-I don't like this, Master. I was just havin fun, doing a one-man comedy routine."

Seina stared at NB, who sounded terribly flustered, with a puzzled look.

“Well, considering there are weird plugins like voyeurism and sexual harassment…” He nodded, seeming to understand.

“Hey, Seina's NB-kun. Isn't there another angle?” Kenneth pushed Seina aside to peer at NB, pointing at the back view of a female student unhooking her bra.

“Nothing's been overlooked. If you move it too fast, it'll be detected, so let's move slowly…”

The angle of the girl unhooking her bra slowly began to move downward.

(There's no stopping him now, no matter what I say.) Seina thought and decided to change his approach.

“Hey, NB. Don't you dare record this. If even a bit of this footage leaks out, I'll tell the teacher no matter what happens.”

“Got it. I don't want to get dismantled or reset either.”

“Alright, since Seina agreed, no holding back! Hey NB-kun, lower it more! Lower it!”

“Aye aye. You guys sure love this, huh?”

The monitor slowly lowered. Just as the woman reached to pull down her shorts, a violent shock hit the cabin, and the monitor cut out with a snap.

“Aaaaaah!!” Kenneth and Rajau grimaced and screamed as if the world were ending.

The bridge, filled with blaring alarms, shook from the intense shock and flashes of battle. But Seiryo, who had just fallen spectacularly, was now desperately clinging to a pipe.

“What's happening?! Report immediately!”

“Unidentified vessel detected ahead. Likely pirates.”

Behind the shouting operator, crouched before the captain's chair, were Alan and the others. They had just tried to pin the blame on Seiryo, got caught red-handed, and were now being interrogated by Amane.

“…Even though the 'Zero Goddess' is aboard, and we've got backup too…”

“Seina's bad luck was just stronger…”

“But maybe it's Ryoko-sama's ship?”

“Whoa!!”

The three looked at the information operator with anticipation.

“Enemy ship data acquired. Da Ruma-affiliated Komachi Kyō’s light cruiser!”

“What the…”

Amane looked down at Alan and the others, who instantly slumped, with a cold gaze.

“You seem rather detached… This situation is partly your fault, you know. Do you even realize that?”

“Ah, no… well… Of course we're reflecting on it. So we hope this matter can be kept within First Officer Kaunaq's heart…” Alan, Barry, and Cohen scrambled to their feet, their expressions submissive.

“Impossible. Given how things stand, I have no choice but to report this matter.”

“No way! That's cruel!”

“It's just a minor mistake, isn't it?”

“Besides, isn't this all just Seina's bad luck anyway?”

As Alan and the others voiced their complaints, the First Officer smiled warmly and said, “After the captain, are you trying to shift the blame onto the students?”

But hidden from Alan and the others, Amane's fist was clenched tightly, trembling as if it might explode any moment.

“W-well…”

“And remember this well: the mission is not over yet. The first time, it can be excused as a mistake, and there may be room for leniency. But the second time…”

“Yes, sir! We'll get back to work immediately!”

Amane's presence was so powerful that Alan and the others stood at attention and saluted with utmost respect.

“Very well.”

At Amane's words, they bolted toward the lower bridge. Only after their figures disappeared from sight did Amane finally relax her tightly clenched fists.

“They're firing from quite a distance. They must know our engines are disabled…”

As soon as Amane finished speaking, an operator nearby addressed her.

“A warning and confirmation, I suppose.”

“I see… So, about that…”

The operators stared at Amane with confused expressions. They wanted her to take command and tell them what to do next.

“Honestly…” Amane clenched her fist again and looked up at Seiryo on the bridge.

“Open all gun ports! Fire the main guns! Fire! Scatter those pirates! Aaaaaahahahahaha!” Seiryo, excited by the sight of the pirates, completely forgot about the engine trouble and roared with fervor.

“We've requested backup, right?”

Amane's words were a signal of understanding. Like a dam bursting, Amane began issuing instructions one after the other in rapid succession.

“Shut down all container functions except life support and the ship's auto-defense systems. Use every main, sub, and operational reactor in each block to supplement the ship's central reactors. Crew members who finish their tasks evacuate to the central ship. Do not use any external weapons; redirect that power to shields and energy charges.”

“Roger!”

“Also, make absolutely sure the students don't leave their rooms.”

That order meant the cargo aboard the training ship—in the worst case, the entire container—was intended to be handed over to the enemy. Of course, this didn't mean a smooth handover; both the intrusion and removal were designed to take considerable time.

“But not using any weapons at all feels unsettling.”

“Against a combat pirate cruiser, using this ship's limited armament would just waste energy. If we provoke them and they launch a full-scale attack, we won't stand a chance. Since it's Komachi Kyō, they probably won't push things too far. If we're lucky, maybe half the cargo will remain…”

“We've made arrangements to reship the cargo, just in case.”

The cargo aboard the training ship contained no personal deliveries. It consisted entirely of mass-produced goods and raw materials that could be easily replaced.

“Thanks. By the way, can you contact the escort ship?”

“The hyperspace exit was due to insufficient propulsion power, so it was bounced off quite a bit by the subspace layer at the boundary. So it's impossible to estimate how far away we are from the escort ship. But as long as they don’t have any trouble, I don't think it will take too long for them to rendezvous with us.”

“Yeah… but…”

“Is there something bothering you?”

“I think this is a good experience for the students. Anyway, separate the containers and conserve energy as much as possible, even if we have to withdraw with just the central ship.”

(As long as Seina was aboard this ship, it was wise to consider other potential troubles—though there was no need to stir up unnecessary anxiety.) Amane thought cheerfully.

Yet, as if deliberately rubbing salt in the wound, Seiryo was shouting from the bridge. “Ha-ha-ha-ha! What the hell are you doing? Fire the main guns!”

“…Does he really have the qualifications to be a captain?”

“Well, 'brute force first' is the Tennan family motto. Their private fleet consists almost entirely of battleships with heavy armor, massive generators, and only main guns.”

“I see… That's why Amane was assigned as the first officer,” the operator muttered under her breath, then turned away from the sullen-looking Amane and focused on her own work.

“Dammit! Why has everyone gone?”

When the panel came on again, there was not a single female student in sight.

“Standby orders are in effect. Isn't that why?”

“Damn it! We were just getting to the good part!”

Watching Kenneth and Rajau sprawled on the floor, sulking, Seina felt relieved.

(I feel bad for Kenneth and Rajau, but that really was a bad idea… Kiriko-san and the others should have deleted that suspicious plugin software…)

Seina looked at NB in puzzlement. It was a top-of-the-line NB with a beautiful opal-like glow. Yet its behavior was exactly like that of a shady old man.

(Come to think of it, that plugin software was all set up by Airi-san. She's a Philosopher, the top scientist at the Academy… If that's the case, even someone at Kiriko-san's level might not be able to fully restore it… That's it! Maybe showing it to another Philosopher would be best.)

While Seina was thinking about this, the female students returned to the bathhouse once more.

“Whoa, looks like they're back!”

“What?!”

Kenneth and Rajau sprang up as if rewinding a video.

“Even with the standby order, movement within the residential block isn't prohibited.”

“Hahaha! There's no need for that kind of logic. The issue is whether or not there is a female body here.”

“That's philosophy for you.”

(…Oh, come on.)

Seina watched Kenneth and Rajau staring at the monitor with a confused expression.

“Numerous small assault craft launched from the enemy ship! Rapidly approaching this vessel!”

“Fire the main guns! Fire the main guns!”

Like a dog seeing snow for the first time, Seiryo reacted to every word from the operator, shouting each command. But no one on the bridge paid Seiryo any mind anymore. Under Amane's command, everyone simply carried out their duties dispassionately.

“Jackknife maneuver… Estimated point of entry?”

“As the First Officer predicted, they’re after the large rear container.”

“Adjust the shield angle carefully.”

“Roger!”

The assault craft displayed on the monitor resembled a knife in shape. One after another, they slammed into the shields deployed along the container's side walls. By pinpoint-adjusting the shield angles to shallow the entry angle, they could deflect enemy craft. This assault craft design had strong penetration power, but if an assault failed, it took some time to prepare for another charge. Yet nearly half the assault craft pierced the shields, slowly penetrating them before embedding themselves into the training ship's outer hull.

“They're not that easy to deal with, are they? What's the energy charge status?”

“Thanks to cutting weapons, it's now at 98%.”

“Okay, no gunfire. Change the external shield to pinpoint. Charge the excess energy into the weapon system.”

“W-What? We're attacking!?”

“Just in case other pirates show up. They might not be as well-behaved as Komachi, right? Plus, it'll distract them during our withdrawal.”

“Roger.”

“Intruders from enemy small craft! Controls inside the container are being cut off.”

“Hmph. To challenge me in close combat… How foolish… Main guns, fire!”

“Then get your ass out there and intercept them!” Amane kicked the pillar of the crow's nest where Seiryo sat, clearly irritated.

Seiryo, who had let go of both hands in excitement, swayed on the wobbling platform and fell dramatically once more.

“Hey, Seina's NB-kun! Enough with the changing room, switch to the bathroom now!”

“What's the rush? Real eroticism lies in undressing. Clothes and underwear strewn about, the faint lines of garments left on the female form…”

“What's more important than that stuff is what's inside! Inside!”

“You're hopeless, aren't you?”

NB switched the monitor feed from the changing room to the bath area. But thick steam made it possible to see only vague silhouettes.

“Dammit! Can't see a thing through this steam!” Kenneth and Rajau started blowing hard at the monitor.

“Wh-what are you doing?” Seina watched the two boys curiously, then clenched his fist tightly.

“…C-could it be… with our tech, blowing on the screen might clear the steam!?” He said with hopeful anticipation.

“No, no. There is no room for intelligence in the face of a man's instincts. That's all.”

“Oh… I see…” Seina, who had pinned his hopes on the power of space science, lowered his fist, looking a little disappointed.

“Oh well. I'll just tweak the ventilation program a bit.”

As the access lamp on NB's body began to flash, Kenneth's excited voice echoed in response.

“Alright, alright, alright… The steam's clearing up… Hurry up and clear, clear…!”

A female student placed her hands on the edge of the bathtub, preparing to step out. Kenneth and Rajau swallowed hard. Seina looked confused and turned away from the screen.

“Good girl! Just a little more!”

Kenneth and Rajau leaned so close they were almost touching the panel. Just as the girl stood up, a close-up of Seiryo covered in blood appeared on the monitor.

“WAAAAAAAAAH!!”

Pushed by Kenneth and Rajau, who had leaped back from the panel, Seina slammed her face squarely into the corner of the bed.

“Students! This ship has engaged pirates! Return to your rooms immediately and under no circumstances leave! That is all!”

Seiryo's transmission ended, and the image switched back to the large bathhouse.

“Whoa… that scared the crap out of me!”

“Yeah, it was a close-up of a guy covered in blood, out of nowhere.”

“Alright… Let's cleanse our palates with some beautiful footage.”

But with a slight vibration of the hull, all the panel displays went dark.

“AAAAAAAA!

“Alright! Everyone, prepare to charge! Follow me! Haaaaaahahaha!” Seiryo, having finished the transmission, raised his sword with satisfaction and dashed out of the bridge.

“Enemy forces have breached blocks 32 and 36!”

“Seal off blocks 40 through 48!”

“Enemy small craft, second wave approaching!”

“Stabilize shield output!”

But not a single operator followed, let alone turned around.

“Engaged…?”

“Master, you're bleeding from your nose.”

Seina started bleeding from his nose after hitting the bed, so NB sprayed him with antiseptic and blood-coagulating spray.

“Seina-kun seems pretty excited, no matter what he says.”

“More importantly, nothing's showing up anymore!” Kenneth began tapping the panel impatiently.

“Hitting it won't help… Looks like the communication line got cut.” NB pulled the plug out of the terminal panel and headed for the door.

“W-where are you going…?”

“Outside. To find a working line. You wanna see what happened next, right?”

“Alright! I'm coming too!” Kenneth followed NB toward the door.

Rajau also stood up.

“But Kenneth, the pirates…”

“It's fine, Seina. This is training! Just training! The pirates are just a part of the drill!”

“That's right. This is definitely an event prepared by the Academy.”

With that, the two followed NB out into the hallway.

“Wait, wait!” Seina hurried out into the hallway to stop them, but Kenneth and Rajau were already climbing the stairs to the central deck.

“Well, I guess there's no helping it.”

Seina briefly considered returning to the room to wait, but decided to check the situation outside to see if this standby order was part of the training.

(If I go to the outer corridor, I should be able to see the situation outside. And if there's fighting happening there, Kenneth and Rajau will probably come back.)

With that thought, Seina rushed up the stairs and stepped out onto the outer perimeter walkway. But there, the flashy battle he had imagined—beams flying everywhere—wasn't happening. It was simply assault boats charging in, only to be deflected by pinpoint shields.

“…This is kind of… dull… If this is what it's like, then Kenneth and Rajau…”

As Seina had expected, the boys were nowhere to be seen. Then, at that moment.

“!”

Suddenly, Seina sensed a killing intent at his back and instinctively dodged. The next instant, a deafening crack like an electrical short circuit erupted, accompanied by the acrid smell of burning metal.

“Guh!”

Spinning around and standing up, Seina found Seiryo standing before him, laser sword drawn, wearing an expression that seemed almost pleased.

“Nice dodge, pirate!”

“Pirate? Seiryo-sensei, it's me! Yamada Seina!”

“All students of this academy should be confined to their rooms!”

“Ah, well, yes, that's true…”

Seina glanced at the pillar where the laser sword had struck. The coating had melted away, exposing scorched, discolored metal.

“Seiryo-sensei, that sword… looks pretty powerful.”

“Relax. It won't kill you unless it hits your head.”

“Considering the position, it seemed like you were aiming for my head?”

“Questions and answers are useless!” Seiryo raised his laser sword and slashed at Seina.

“Ugh, waaaaaaaah!” Seina dodged the blow and fled at full speed.

In the dimly lit corridor, perhaps due to power conservation, NB accessed a terminal through an inspection hatch. But the monitor showed only an empty corridor.

“What the hell are you doing? There's nobody there!” Kenneth jabbed at NB irritably.

“Shut up and watch.”

“Ah, there's someone there!”

A small figure appeared on the monitor Rajau pointed at.

“It's too dark to tell… Oh, it's Seina! Guess he got curious too.”

“He's a guy too, after all. It's the same passageway over here, so he should be able to join us soon.”

“Huh? Looks like there's someone else too…”

Just then, the sound of Seina and Seiryo's footsteps approached from afar, and in the blink of an eye, they ran past the three of them.

“…Wasn't that Seiryo-sensei?”

“Looked like it.”

“But he was swinging his sword around, chasing after Seina-kun?”

“Looked like it.”

“What should we do?”

“The results of his bio-enhancement seem to be showing, so it should be fine.”

“Yeah.”

“Right.”

Kenneth, Rajau, and NB exchanged glances and nodded, then turned back to the monitors and resumed their work.

“First Officer Amane! …Captain Seiryo is chasing someone. Is this…” The operator monitoring the ship's surveillance said with a puzzled look, then transferred the ship's surveillance monitor footage to Amane.

“Ha ha ha! That pirate, I wonder how far he'll go?”

The monitor showed Seiryo happily chasing after Seina.

“That idiot! Hey, someone stop that idiot captain…”

Amane looked up, noticing the operators watching her with expressions that clearly showed they wanted nothing to do with this. Granted, with the pirate attack, engine room repairs, and protecting the students, there really wasn't any spare manpower…

“Understood, I'll go! Contact me if an emergency decision is needed.” Amane snapped irritably before dashing off the bridge.

“Captain! That target seems to have been guarded by a watchdog.”

Komachi, who had launched in a assault boat, received an urgent message from her ship.

“What do you mean?”

“The Big Da Ruma and a Juraian ship have made contact.”

“A Juraian ship!? An Imperial Ship?”

“No, just a standard vessel. Based on their positions, it's highly likely it was the escort ship. Probably got separated when it exited hyperspace due to engine trouble…”

“Hmph… Oh well. Still, a Juraian ship, huh?” Komachi, having confirmed it wasn't an Imperial Ship, let out a sigh of relief.

“What should we do? Should we sink it and go assist The Big Da Ruma?”

“Support? The Big Da Ruma still hasn't sunk the escort ship?”

“Huh. It’s pretty fast… Video feed incoming.”

“!?……I've never seen this type before… but this one's probably a Juraian reconnaissance ship.” Komachi's expression darkened as she watched the footage of Natsuki transferred to the monitor.

“It infiltrates enemy territory for reconnaissance. In a way, it's just as troublesome an opponent as an Imperial Ship.”

“Then all the more reason…”

“Calm down! Even if it's troublesome, it can't sink The Big Da Ruma. Besides, this situation might actually be useful.”

In an instant, Komachi, deep in thought, immediately began issuing orders to her subordinates.

“Alright! Forward the distress signal being transmitted by the training ship to the Juraian vessel.”

“Are you serious? Why bother calling us over? The Big Da Ruma will probably take care of it eventually, right?”

“You idiot! I told you it's a reconnaissance ship! It's hanging around to gather information. It's not going to just sit there and wait to be sunk. It's going to leave at the right time and call for help or give chase! So, call them and have The Big Da Ruma change course.”

“But will it come here?”

“Usually, training ships are escorted by GP ships. If it's a Juraian ship instead, it's natural to assume this training ship has something special. Anyway, it's worth a shot!”

“I see. But dealing with a Juraian ship is no picnic.”

“Worst case, we sacrifice the mothership. I'm counting on you.”

“Roger.”

The moment the communication ended, the shockwave from the training ship's shields colliding struck the assault boat carrying Komachi.

“Hakuren-sama! A distress signal from the training ship!”

Amidst the vibration waves and the clang of attacks, the operator's shrill, piercing voice echoed across Natsuki's bridge.

“What did you say!?”

Hearing the report, Hakuren looked toward Tsurashima, as if confirming his own judgment.

“If communications are reaching us through these jamming shockwaves, there's only one possible explanation.”

“That the enemy has relayed it.”

“It seems they want us gone as soon as possible. What shall we do?”

Wanting them gone quickly meant they'd sink the training ship if they don't go to its aid.

“Our mission is to escort the training ship.”

“But that planet-class ship is probably…”

Tsurashima also realized that planet-scale ship was The Big Da Ruma. If they broke off here and headed for the training ship, putting distance between them and The Big Da Ruma, reacquisition would be virtually impossible.

“Are you going to abandon what could be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity?”

It was also Tsurashima's test.

“Even if that's the case, the encounter with that ship is highly likely due to Yamada Seina-sama's power. I don't think we need to weigh that rare ability and those young potentials against a mere pirate Guild's base ship, do you?”

“Hmph, understood. Launch all EGS units while executing an emergency withdrawal! Simultaneously acquire coordinates, transmit the situation report to Mikagami, and jump to hyperspace!”

Satisfied, Tsurashima immediately issued the order.

Natsuki, having launched the unmanned small surveillance EGS units, applied emergency braking to decelerate. In the blink of an eye, the planet-class ship vanished from view. Once outside the shockwave's influence, Natsuki acquired the training ship's coordinates and immediately performed a hyperspace jump. It was a speed that would astonish anyone familiar with ship handling.

Chased by Seiryo, Seina fled into a dim cargo hold filled with storage containers. But it was a dead end—the opposite exit blocked by containers collapsed by the battle's shockwaves. Seiryo lunged at the cornered Seina.

“Ha ha ha! Prepare yourself!”

“Guh!” Seina spun around, seized Seiryo's wrist, and stopped the laser sword as it swung down.

“Huh… So you've grown enough to block my sword… Your teacher is pleased.”

“Even though you recognized me, you did that on purpose…”

“Originally, your Bio-Enhancement was supposed to be my responsibility. It is my duty to verify the results.” Seiryo tensed his arm further, preparing to bring his laser sword down on Seina.

“You're… quite dedicated to your duties. But haven't you… already confirmed everything sufficiently? Besides, pirates are attacking, aren't they?”

“Hmph! They might be closer than we think…”

The next instant, a tremendous roar echoed as an assault boat smashed through the wall.

“Damn! Is everyone back in their rooms?”

Kenneth and Rajau were staring at the monitor with NB, but it seemed the girls had all returned to their rooms, and no one was in sight.

“Aren't there surveillance cameras in the dorm rooms?”

“I didn't have time for that. Besides, how would we know which room belongs to whom? Installing cameras and then being shocked by what we see? That'd be awful, wouldn't it?”

“Well, I guess you're right…”

“The dorm rooms are definitely too risky. Besides, it's impossible until this commotion dies down, so it's about time we… Ugh!?”

At that moment, Rajau felt something hard, like a metal pipe, pressed against his head.

“Huh? What's wrong?”

Kenneth, suspicious at Rajau's interrupted words, looked away from the monitor.

“Don't move!”

Two pirates, guns drawn, had appeared beside Kenneth and Rajau without them noticing.

“Who the hell are these guys? Students?”

“Accessing the ship's surveillance through an inspection hatch in a place like this? That's just plain suspicious as hell.”

“Should we take them out?”

The pirates aimed their guns at Kenneth and Rajau.

“W-we were just peeking through a camera NB set up…”

“Guilty as charged, huh? Never heard of any student carrying an NB.”

“Yikes!”

Just as the pirates pulled the triggers, their bodies were flung sideways.

“Are you okay?”

“…Huh?”

Kenneth and Rajau cautiously looked toward the voice and noticed Amane standing there, enveloped by a Guardian that had partially materialized.

“Sensei~!”

Kenneth and Rajau, tears welling up, rushed straight into Amane's chest. While it was true they were freed from the terror of having guns pointed at them, it was also true they had

planned to take advantage of the situation to touch Amane's chest. Amane caught their charge with her Guardian and stared at them with a cold expression.

“You understand that the orders we give carry real meaning, right?”

“…Y-yes.”

“That's enough.”

Kenneth and Rajau slowly lowered the hands they had stretched toward Amane's chest and saluted.

“Very well. I'm off to protect Seina-kun, so I can't escort you, but the passage to the residential block is still safe. Hurry!” Amane said.

Before the two could reply, she tossed a restraint grenade at the unconscious pirates and immediately began running.With a popping sound, the restraining foam gel enveloped the pirates and hardened.

“Phew.”

Kenneth and Rajau, confirming this, finally exhaled in relief.

“Let's hurry back, Kenneth-kun.”

“Damn it, that NB guy got us into quite a mess…”

“Huh? NB isn't here.”

“What?! Where did he go instead of protecting us?”

“Forget that. We need to get back immediately. Ensuring our safety is more important right now.”

“Y-Yeah, you're right.”

Kenneth took one look at the hardened gel and ran as fast as he could towards the residential block, fleeing the scene.

“Wh-what?”

When the assault boat rammed in, Seina was bewildered by a strange sensation. It felt as if, for an instant, he was underwater. The shockwave and blast from the assault boat's impact was transferred to the air, which had suddenly thickened, dissipating in an instant. However, Seiryo, who was near the point where the waves converged, received a slight recoil and was slammed into the wall.

“Seiryo-sensei… Are you okay?”

As Seina tried to rush to Seiryo's side, a hissing sound came from behind him. White foam sprayed from the assault boat, sealing the hole it had torn in the outer bulkhead. This prevented the repair program from activating, avoiding the risk of being sealed in along with the assault boat itself, and preparing for their escape. Then, the front section of the assault boat pushed aside the stacked containers and fallen building materials like a jack, opening up vertically.

“What should I do? I have to escape… Whoa!”

Seina, bewildered, was suddenly shoved from behind and fell into the shadow of a container.

“Come out! You pirates!” Seiryo, who had recovered at some point, dashed toward the assault boat, laser sword drawn. At that moment, Seiryo seemed more reliable than usual.

With heavy, clattering footsteps, a large woman named Komachi Kyō emerged from the entrance at the front of the assault boat.

“Hmph! What's this? Just one woman?”

Seeing Seiryo speak in an arrogant tone, Komachi looked puzzled and checked her chest and clothing.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

This time, Seiryo stared back at Komachi, puzzled. But the cause of Komachi's strange behavior was the blood streaming from Seiryo's nose.

A man staring at her while blood dripped steadily from his nose was indeed strange. Of course, Komachi, a giantess easily mistaken for a man, was well aware she wasn't the type to excite men. That's why she'd checked her clothes. But seeing the blood on the wall and the trail of bloodstains leading from it, Komachi understood Seiryo's earlier situation.

Relieved, she said, “My name is Komachi Kyō. What is yours?” She drew the hilt of her laser sword from her waist as she declared her name.

“I don't have a name to give to a weird pirate like you. Now get lost and go see a doctor.”

“You're the weird one! Wipe that nosebleed first. It'll ease the tension.”

“What? Oh no, this is bad!” Seiryo frantically wiped his nose, straightened his clothes, and readied his laser sword again.

(I see… So that's the Tennan family idiot. But that stance… Hmph! Might be dangerous to underestimate him as just a fool.)

The air between Seiryo and Komachi, now locked in a standoff, shifted completely from the earlier lighthearted mood. Seina, who had been hiding behind a container watching the whole thing, swallowed hard, his saliva thick with tension. Not that it was the trigger, but…

“Haah!”

“Ooh!”

With a cry, Komachi and Seiryo closed the distance in an instant, swinging their laser swords down.

BAMMMM! The moment their laser swords clashed, the output surged, making the blades visible. At that instant, sensors mistook the surge for a fire or an energy leak accident. They deployed snake-like projectors, firing insulating bubble gel directly at the two laser swords.

“Whoa!”

Though knocked back by the bubble gel's impact, Seiryo and Komachi immediately regained their footing.

“Wh-what the…!? My hand!?”

Their hands, along with their laser swords, were now bound together by the rubberized gel. As more bubble gel was fired, Komachi and Seiryo, still bound together, desperately began dodging it. GP members and pirates—enemies and allies—yet the two dodged the bubble gel with remarkable coordination.

“Why are they reacting to us… could it be that they're reacting to the energy of our laser swords!?”

“Just look at the gel's trajectory!”

Seiryo and Komachi knew what the sensors were targeting, so avoiding the bubble gel was relatively easy for them. But that wasn't the case for Seina.

“Whoa!”

Seiryo and Komachi's bodies were in the blind spot of the bubble gel's trajectory. Seina was hit by the bubble gel that they had dodged, and was stuck to the wall.

“Ha ha ha! You're nowhere near being top-tier GP yet with that kind of performance!”

“You idiot! Don't look away!”

For a split second, their coordination faltered. Unable to fully dodge the incoming bubble gel, Seiryo took a direct hit. If one became immobilized, the other's mobility would also drop. Ultimately, Komachi too was stuck to the floor.

“Damn it!”

Seiryo and Komachi struggled desperately to break free, but the rubberized gel was beyond human strength.

“Hmph, gel like this is nothing…!” Seiryo drew his laser knife.

“Idiot!”

But before Komachi could stop him, Seiryo brought out his laser blade.

Splash, splash! In an instant, Seiryo was shot with gel and could only move his face.

“You know what that reacts to, don't you?! You idiot!”

“What the hell!? You're no better off yourself!”

“You and I are stuck together! If you get caught, I won't be able to escape either, you idiot!”

Beside the arguing pair, a sensor activated. With a loud bang, a large vent opened in the ceiling, releasing a massive amount of disaster prevention gel. This substance filled the warehouse to protect cargo from theft and accidents. The flowing gel rapidly increased in volume, spreading across the floor.

“Wh-what? What's going on?”

“Shut up for a second!” Komachi covered Seiryo's mouth and contacted her ship.

“Hey, the repair gel is malfunctioning. Can you control it from over there?”

“Hold on a moment…”

“Aaaah!” A small scream echoed from inside the bridge.

“Hey, what's going on!?”

“Nothing serious! More importantly, that control panel over there seems to have been hacked by something… I'll fix it right away, just hold on a moment.”

“Hacked?”

Komachi looked around in confusion. A few blocks away in the corridor, NB was using the systems of the training ship to intervene in the pirates' systems.

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“Access to the pirate ship successful. Huh, I always thought pirates were all sweaty, scruffy guys… but there are some good-looking women too. …Wait a minute, are you showing the guys too? …The guys don't matter. Eh, keep it up, keep it up.”

In front of NB, who was making mysterious jokes and comebacks to himself, several monitors activated, displaying the women's changing room on Komachi’s ship. Then, one after another, the women's restroom and other female-only rooms were shown.

“This is a huge haul! Since they’re pirates, they won’t complain—I can record this openly… Still, these angles seem unnatural for surveillance cameras… Could it be that there's someone over there with the same hobby as me… Ugh!!”

Suddenly, the monitor showed a close-up of a man's butt. Then, just like before, the men's changing room, men's restroom, men's dormitory, and so on were displayed one after another.

“Oh, I know that feeling. …Whoa! That scared me. …Don't switch it out like that all of a sudden! …What the hell? Guys are filming this too? …But the real question is whether it's the guys or the girls doing the filming. Judging by the camera angles, it's definitely two different groups setting this up… Hmm, well then, I'll track down where the data's being sent… That's a good idea. Maybe we'll even find a personal data bank… Ugh!”

While NB was absorbed in controlling the controls, a hand was suddenly placed on his head. Then, with tremendous force, the hand slowly lifted NB's body up.

“Whoa, it's cracking, cracking, it's cracking apart~~”

“What the hell are you doing here?” Amane, veins bulging at her temples, glared at the struggling NB.

“Ah… Amane-san, what's up? I've got footage of some hot guys too…”

“Where's Seina?”

NB's core unit creaked and bent.

“I-I don't know… We got separated along the way…”

“Find him!”

Bang! With enough force to pierce flesh, Amane pressed her gun against NB. If he said one more unnecessary word, she would scrap him for sure.

“I'll look for him right away…”

Suddenly, multiple monitors displaying suspicious surveillance footage began showing the interior of the training ship at an incredible speed.

“What the hell is this?! When did you guys get this?!”

The female operators pointed at the footage of women's changing rooms and private quarters, glaring at the male operators with contempt. The scream Komachi had heard earlier belonged to one of the female operators watching the footage.

“Unbelievable! I'm definitely reporting this to Komachi-sama!”

The male operators, watching the shouting female operator with cold stares, pointed to another monitor.

“This one shows the men's changing room and bath area. We should report this to Komachi-

sama too, right?”

“…Ah… that…” The female operators who knew they were implicated flushed red.

“Hold on! Fighting amongst ourselves is pointless. How about we form a united front for ship surveillance and cover each other's blind spots?”

“Ship surveillance?”

“Exactly! To protect the safety of our ship.”

“So, in other words… that thing, right?”

“Exactly that!”

The male operator representative and female operator representative exchanged glances and smiled. In short, it meant cooperating to install surveillance (?) cameras in areas difficult for either side to access alone.

The male and female operator representatives shook hands to seal their agreement, while the surrounding operators applauded the treaty signing.

“Now that's settled, hurry up and destroy the evidence! Restore the hacked systems!”

“Right! If others find out here, it'll be useless!”

“Roger! …Wait, WAAAH! Jump-out shockwave! It's close!”

With the operators' shouts, Komachi’s ship shook violently as the Natsuki appeared ahead.

The expelled gel increased in volume, already reaching Seiryo's neck.

“…If no one comes soon, I guess we'll drown here.”

Komachi, still in a relatively safe position, gazed blankly at the scene.

“Don't be so casual!”

“Then what about your rescue team?”

“They're currently out of communication!”

“Like you're in any position to talk!”

Just as Komachi yelled that, a scream-like transmission came through.

“Oh my head! The Juraian ship has arrived!”

“Already? They're quite early. Impressive skills… You lot should take notes.”

“What are you babbling about?!”

“This is my conversation. Don't interrupt!” Komachi clamped both hands over Seiryo's mouth.

"We don't have time to mess with the system controls, and the people who have rushed in aren't equipped to handle the situation, so we're sending in a rescue team!"

“Roger that! I'm counting on you.”

After ending the transmission, Komachi let out a small sigh and released Seiryo's mouth. Having been unable to breathe and growing dazed, Seiryo slumped down, completely spent.

“…Hmph, whatever. This way he's quieter… Come to think of it, there was someone else here also, right?”

Komachi tried to check on Seina, who was stuck to the wall.

“…Hmm, what's that?”

The spot Seina was stuck to was slightly elevated, so only a small pool of gel had gathered at his feet. Without fresh gel being supplied, the gel trapping Seina had solidified into a translucent mass. Only then did Komachi finally notice that Seina was wearing a student uniform.

“Hey, hey! Wake up! Are you listening!?” Komachi pounded Seiryo's head like a Mokugyo while shouting. **(TN: A Japanese wooden fish drum is called a mokugyo (木魚), a hollow, bell-shaped percussion instrument carved from a single piece of wood, commonly found in Buddhist temples.)**

“What the hell, shut up! Stop hitting my head!”

“Hey, that boy… Could he be a student?”

“Hmph… He's in special remedial lessons. I figured showing him my heroic form would be good study material.”

Hearing Seiryo's words, Komachi turned pale.

“You… you idiot! You dragged a student into combat?!”

“What do you mean, idiot?! There's no better education than real combat!”

“At this time of year, the training is for the newly enrolled first-year students, right? And you call pitting them against us 'real combat training'? Cut the crap!”

“I'm here with them. You lot are nothing to me!”

“Look at yourself, you fool! How dare you say that!”

While the two coverded in gel started arguing, Seina, who was pressed against the wall,

used his free hand to search the tool pouch hanging from his waist.

“…Um… Ah, this is it.”

Seina pulled a small knife from the pouch and thrust it into the rubberized gel. But the gel instantly hardened, deflecting the blade.

“No good… It seemed pretty soft though… Huh?”

As he tried to pull the knife back, the slight drag left a clean, sharp cut. Seina experimented, pressing the knife against the gel with varying degrees of force to see if he could cut it.

“I see… If I press hard, it hardens, but if I go slowly, I can cut it.”

Realizing this, Seina quickly began clearing away the gel. While Seina quietly worked on his escape, Seiryo and Komachi were still arguing.

“You idiot! Even though they're GP, students are considered non-combatants! We don't lay a finger on them, even during combat! And yet you brought him out here like this…”

“Who do you pirates think you are, acting so high and mighty!”

“You… you bloody idiot!”

Thud! With her tension rising, Komachi slammed her head into Seiryo with all her might. The impact knocked Seiryo unconscious, his eyes still wide open.

“Pirates and GP have nothing to do with this! Don't you understand this is the pride of those who live and fight in space?! Are you even a man?! Is this how those who fight us pirates should look?! …Hey, are you listening?! …Hey?!”

Noticing Seiryo's lack of response, Komachi lightly jabbed him with her index finger. With a limp thud, Seiryo collapsed, burying his face in the gel. At that moment, Komachi caught sight of Seina moving at the edge of her vision.

“Huh!? Wait… when did you… how did you…?”

“Just in case something happens, I always carry this. It doesn't trigger any reactions either.” Seina showed Komachi a small knife that glinted gold.

“You brought something like that… You're well-prepared, kid.”

“Master, master, can you hear me?”

“NB? Where are you now?”

Seina raised his hand to Komachi, signaling to pause their conversation, then spoke into the activated communication monitor. Amane pushed past NB and appeared.

“Seina, are you there? Are you okay?”

“Ah, Amane-sensei. I'm fine, but this weird gel won't stop…”

“I know. NB will tell you how to stop it now. Come on, hurry up and tell him!”

“Got it. Hey, there's a ladder near Master, right? If you climb up, there's a platform where a person can stand, right?”

Seina started moving as NB instructed. He climbed the ladder and opened the panel there.

“I'm about to display the correct values. Try inputting them.”

“Roger.”

The value sent by NB showed only one parameter was off. But even when he quickly entered the correct value there, it immediately reset.

“No good. It resets no matter how many times I try.”

“The enemy's control system is interfering… Well, no choice. We'll have to switch from auto to manual and stop it by hand.”

“Ah, the procedure is written here.”

Seina quickly scanned the instructions and switched the control system to manual. A T-shaped screwdriver-like tool then extended, and Seina began turning it.

“Whoa, it’s heavy… I wouldn't have been able to turn this without Bio-Enhancement…”

With each turn of the T-shaped handle, the gel flow weakened until it finally stopped completely.

“Phew… Alright, it's stopped.”

“Wow… That boy's got it… He's nothing like this idiot.” Komachi patted Seiryo's head, who was still face-down and unconscious.

“Huh? What is it?”

“You little…”

Seeing his utterly foolish state, Komachi instinctively raised her fist to hit him, but quickly lowered her hand. She felt it would be cowardly to punch Seiryo, who was completely buried in gel from the neck down and couldn't move. She also felt it wouldn't be right to turn a teacher, however foolish, into a punching bag in front of a student. Especially since that student had just saved her.

“Captain, sorry to keep you waiting. We're connecting to your assault craft and boarding now.”

“Yes, please.”

GAGON! The docking sound echoed through the warehouse.

“!!”

Hearing the sound, Seina reflexively hid behind a collapsed container. Seconds later, four pirates burst out from Komachi's assault boat's entry point.

“Komachi-sama, are you safe?!”

The pirate who rushed to Komachi's side began examining the solidified gel.

(This is bad… What should I do? I can't just leave Seiryo-senaei behind… But I can't handle this alone either.)

Suddenly, as Seina hid behind a container and pondered, several monitors flickered to life, displaying pirated footage of the pirate ship. Due to the struggle for system control between the pirate ship and NB, the feed had been relayed to Seina's terminal as well. And then…

“You damned pirates! You dare challenge me to a cyber duel? You've got some nerve!” NB's voice boomed loudly throughout the warehouse.

“Enemy behind the container!”

The pirates stepped forward to shield Komachi and simultaneously opened fire at the container where the monitors were activated.

“Ah, you fools!!”

The security gel was inactive, but the bubble gel launchers restraining Seina and the others were still operational. Bubble gel shot out toward the pirates' guns.

“Whoa!”

In an instant, gel hit the guns of two pirates.

“Damn!”

The pirate who dodged successfully destroyed that nozzle, but the next instant, ten new nozzles appeared from all around.

“Gah!”

“Drop your guns!”

At Komachi's shout, the pirates instinctively flung their guns away. Splash! Splash! The discarded guns instantly solidified by lumps of gel.

“They're overreacting to the energy. Don't use laser swords to cut the gel either!”

“But!” The pirates watched Seina warily.

“That's a student over there. Leave him alone! Use the emergency axes instead!”

“R-right!”

At Komachi's angry shout, the pirates left one man on guard and ran toward the assault boat.

“You useless bastard! How dare you put Seina in danger as his bodyguard!” Enraged, Amane was pounding the NB like a punching bag.

“It's not me! It's the other me's fault!”

“I'll reset you when we get back!”

“First Officer Amane. The escort ship has arrived. The pirates are retreating.”

“Urgent! Get rescue gear here and rotate security personnel immediately!”

“Roger!”

“Dammit! How hard is this thing?!”

The pirates swung their axes, producing a metallic clanging sound. Yet the gel showed no sign of breaking.

“This just won't cut it. We gotta find a way to destroy those snakes…”

“Um…”

Unable to watch any longer, Seina called out to the pirates from behind the container.

“That gel. If you cut slowly, it will break.”

“Huh? …Oh, you're right!”

Pulling the axe blade back slowly, it slid smoothly into the gel.

“Okay! Just hurry up slowly.”

“This is complicated.”

“Ha ha ha! Aren't my students brilliant? This is all thanks to my teaching!”

“No matter how you look at it, you're nothing but a bad example.” Komachi muttered, suppressing the urge to punch the arrogant Seiryo, just as the sound of something smashing through the wall came from outside.

“So they're here too.”

“What should we do? We still have a little time…”

Due to all their struggling, Komachi and Seiryo's limbs were still stuck together.

“There's no other way. Cut a big chunk out and carry this guy along with it!”

“Wh-what the hell!? If you want to run, I'll let you go! Just go back alone!”

“Shut up! Be quiet! I hate this too!” Komachi covered Seiryo's mouth.

“Boss, either way, we need to buy some time or we won't make it in time! Could you please get that student over there to help us out?”

“…I guess there's no other way.” As a displeased Komachi said this, the GP rescue team's energy torch blasted a small hole in the wall.

But at that very moment, gel sprayed out from the firing port.

“Ha ha! This is perfect. This buys us time.”

But a few minutes later, the protruding gel nozzle retracted, and the wall began to burn through again.

“Tch, whatever. At least this means we can use our energy blades too…”

“Boss, the tool set is buried in gel.”

The tools the pirates had brought were buried in thick gel.

“Damn it! Hurry up! Don't let those GP bastards beat us!”

“Roger that!”

Working at a frantic pace, the pirates severed the gel mass containing Komachi and Seiryo before Amane and security could burn through the wall. All four pirates grabbed the mass and began running toward the assault boat.

“Hold on!” Komachi said, stopping the pirates. “Thanks for everything, kid! Come to think of it, I never asked your name. Care to tell me?” She called out to Seina.

“Huh!? Oh, It’s Yamada Seina!”

“Whaaaaaaat?!”

Hearing that name, Komachi and the pirates all turned toward Seina with looks of utter shock.

“Ah, so you're the one everyone's been talking about… I see, that explains why the Juraian guards were…”

“Wh-what should we do? Should we take him, Captain?”

“He saved my life, you know. Besides, you lot owe him too, don't you?”

“Well, if you say so, Captain… Still, I never imagined he was such a little brat.”

“You bastard, Yamada Seina! Don't you dare lay a finger on Amane just because I'm gone! Do you understand?! There's an insurmountable wall of status between you and Amane!”

“You stay quiet!” Komachi covered Seiryo's mouth again and signaled to her subordinates.

The pirates began running toward the assault boat once more.

“Right! Yamada Seina. This is my thanks for all your help. Watch out for a man named Tarrant.”

The moment the voice faded, the assault boat's hatch slammed shut.

“Tarrant? … Ugh!”

The moment Komachi's assault boat broke away, the same sensation as during the initial breach—like being underwater—returned. The hole in the wall sealed shut with gel spurting from the surface, and the air's viscosity returned to normal. Amane and the others burst through the broken wall mere seconds later.

“Seina, are you hurt!?”

“Amane-sensei, Seiryo-sensei has been taken!” Seina pointed toward the hole the assault boat had made as Amane rushed over.

“Huh!? Really? Yes!” Amane celebrated with a dramatic fist pump, only to notice Seina's look of confusion—or perhaps slight disdain.

“Ohhh… Well… That's… rather unfortunate for those pirates…”

“Huh? …Well… Maybe.” Remembering Komachi and Seiryo's argument, Seina found himself agreeing with Amane.

## Chapter Four: Baptism of Peace and Madness

In the Galaxy Academy Chairman's Office, Airi and Mikami faced each other, staring at a single monitor as they held a meeting.

“…You're aware, I'm sure, that we know you're controlling NB with those shady acquaintances of yours online…”

“Wh-what are you talking about?”

As Airi feigned ignorance, Mikami activated one of the monitors.

“This is terrible, Airi-sama! I was so scared! Suddenly I couldn't control NB anymore, it started doing strange things, showing Seina-san disgusting images… Well, Seina-san is a man, so I suppose he's interested… But he kindly told his friends to stop, and I'm glad about that… Still, because of me, Seina-san was put in danger…” Kirche, shown on the monitor, tearfully complained to Airi. But in the end, the kind-hearted Kirche started blaming herself instead of Airi.

“It's not your fault, Kirche-san. Don't worry about it. This is all Airi-sama's fault.”

“What!?… But NB's actions were decided by majority vote, so it can't be just my fault…”

“Still, you were the organizer, Airi-sama. As for what Kiriko-san might do upon learning Seina-kun was endangered because of this, or how Seto-sama might react… well, I'm not interested in that right now, so rest assured. Hohoho.”

“I-I won't do it again! Please don't tell Kiriko-chan, Seto-sama, or Minaho!” Airi suddenly knelt down in front of Kirche and Mikami and apologized.

“Is that true, Airi-sama?”

“Of course! Absolutely!”

“Understood. I'll apologize to Seina-san tonight as well. Excuse me now.” Wiping away her tears, Kirche flashed a charming, sweet smile. She bowed once and vanished along with the monitor.

“She really is adorable, isn't she? Hehehe.”

“You really do have a kind heart, don't you?”

"When I think about the people who are suffering because of someone who has no ability to learn, I try to be kind, hahaha."

“Everyone seems so cold lately…”

“Is that why you added Minaho-san to the list of people you want to keep quiet about?”

“But, but… Lately, whenever it comes to anything involving Seina-kun, Minaho becomes just as unforgiving as Kiriko-chan.”

“It's true that Minaho-san has quite the history with Seina-kun through Kiriko-san and Kiyone-san. Still, leaving the Academy and encountering pirates just three hours and thirty-six minutes into actual operations… And in that sector, no less… The odds are astronomical.” As if sensing it was about time, Mikami steered the conversation back to the main topic.

Airi rose from her kneeling position with a sigh of relief and sat down in a chair.

“…That's right. I guess it's on the same level as your Mitoto-san and Mihoshi-chan.”

“It's not confirmed yet, but if what Natsuki encountered was the Da Ruma Guild's central mothership… then he possesses extraordinary talent.”

“It’s not confirmed, but that old hag is certain, right? Otherwise, the military wouldn’t have approached him so quickly, asking him to join the decoy division right away.” Airi glanced at the important document plate on her desk.

“It's pitiful how those people are rejoicing without realizing Seto-sama leaked it, ho ho ho.”

“Seina-kun's talent is nothing but a nuisance to him, but it's invaluable to the GP. Since we can monopolize it, shouldn't we overlook him getting a little excited?”

“However, that unit is too difficult for inexperienced Academy students to be assigned to…”

“Talent is not a part, it cannot be replaced or mass-produced. … Why not just use 'Kamidake'?”

“Kamidake! But Airi-sama, isn't that Jurai's next capital battleship?” Mikami looked at Airi in surprise.

“It's worth it, isn't it? For that talent… Well, I was thinking it was about time for a mock battle test anyway. With that kid aboard, it'll inevitably become a real combat test.”

“But the ship's data will be passed on to the GP too. Are you sure that's okay?”

“Hmm… Well, that's true. …But I think a little leak might be good for venting steam? After all, Jurai has Imperial Ships anyway.”

“Understood. Then, as soon as the training ship returns, I'll speak with Amane-san. What about Kiriko-san?”

“I was thinking of talking to her directly tonight.” Airi said as she began composing an email to Kiriko.

That night, after finishing her duties, Kiriko returned to the house by the lake for the first time in months.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Kiriko stepped into the entryway, where the door stood open, and headed straight for the living room. There, Airi, already having had a few drinks, was wrestling with a large boiled crab caught in the lake.

“Take a look at this.”

“Huh? Okay.”

Glancing sideways at Airi, who was engrossed in picking meat from the crab shell, Kiriko picked up the document plate sitting on the desk, splattered with bits of crab meat.

“……What the hell?! They're sending Seina-chan to the decoy division for practical training… No way!” Kiriko shouted at Airi, her face flushed with anger.

Airi quickly moved the crab meat she had saved away to keep it out of Kiriko's reach.

“Seina-chan isn't a part! This is ridiculous!”

Uncharacteristically for Kiriko, she voiced only raw emotion. But it was precisely because she fully understood Airi's reasoning and the GP's political calculations that she could only counter with emotional words.

“Did you know, Kiriko-chan, that the escort for the training ship Seina-kun was on was Natsuki?”

“Natsuki… Utsutsumi-sama's Thirteenth Sentinel Fleet reconnaissance ship!”

“That's right. When Seina-kun's training ship had engine trouble and made an emergency jump-out, Natsuki also jumped out into normal space… and at that moment, Natsuki happened to encounter a certain ship.”

Airi activated the monitor displaying the footage of the unidentified ship recorded by Natsuki in front of Kiriko.

“What!? Is this a planet-scale ship? …Come to think of it, the pirates who attacked Seina-chan were Komachi Kyō’s! Then, could this possibly be!?”

Realizing the pirates who attacked Seina's training ship were Da Ruma Guild executives, Kiriko understood what that planet-scale ship was.

“Jurai Intelligence has identified this as the Da Ruma Guild's base ship, The Big Da Ruma.”

“No way…” Kiriko collapsed, plopping down onto the carpet.

Seina's assignment to the decoy division for practical training had been finalized. The fact that this information was being disclosed to Kiriko here meant it had already leaked to military higher-ups through various channels.

“…So this is a done deal, then?”

“If we strike at the heart of the Da Ruma Guild, we can significantly weaken the pirate forces… Plus, we'll gain access to the vast amount of information the Guild has accumulated.”

A huge pirate Guild would possess considerable intelligence. Its internal documents likely contained vast amounts of information on allied and rival pirate organizations, as well as on the Galactic Federation and the Renza Federation. Combined with the Galactic Federation's own records, this information had the power to completely rewrite the galaxy's power map.

“Both Seto-sama and Principal Mikami… they all wanted Seina-kun to properly enjoy his student life. Of course, they believed it would be good for his mental growth too… But now that things have come to this, we need to move a bit faster. Once the dismantling of the pirate forces begins, it can't be stopped. We need to do it all at once… You understand, right?”

For better or worse, both the pirates and the Galactic Federation maintained stable positions. But a large-scale dismantling of pirate forces could corner them, potentially forcing them to resort to drastic measures. While it wouldn't threaten the very existence of the Galactic Federation, significant damage would be inevitable.

“That's why Seto-sama granted permission to use the 'Kamidake'.”

“The next Juraian flagship?!”

“Since Seina-kun is being temporarily assigned to the decoy unit, it's only natural to provide as much support as possible, right?”

“So you want to conduct a live-fire test, huh?”

“Well, frankly speaking, yes. Tennyo-chan's team is currently working around the clock on it.”

“… Poor things.”

“They were really fired up, saying it was for Seina-chan's sake… Well, both Seina-kun and Kamidake are making their debuts a bit early, but I think Seina-kun will be fine. That is, if Seina-kun says it's okay, of course.” Even as she said this, Airi's tone conveyed absolute

confidence that Seina would agree.

Kiriko felt the same way.

"…… Seina-chan is always like this, you know. Always…"

"But Seina-kun isn't alone. Around him, starting with Kiriko-chan, there are plenty of people… well, maybe not plenty, but you know how much power that group holds, right?"

"I'd be happy to do it for free. Besides, everyone keeps me too busy to slack off."

"Not having free time is the best! Even close friends need to maintain proper etiquette, right?"

"So naturally, Kamidake's battle data will be patented, right?" Saying that, Kiriko transferred about half of Airi's mountain of crab onto her own plate.

"Huh? …Well, the pay comes from GP…" Airi quietly returned that half to her own plate.

"During Seina-chan's training, NB acted suspiciously. Airi-sama must have done something, right? Thanks to that, Seina-chan had a rough time, didn't he?"

"W-Who told you that!?"

"If you examine Amane's report, you can figure it out!"

Amane's sharp reports documented even the most minor details she deemed important. And Kiriko could deduce quite detailed circumstances from them.

"…… Um…"

"Even close friends need to maintain proper etiquette, right?" Kiriko took the portion of crab meat Airi had taken back from her plate and returned it to her own. She then poured sweet soy sauce over it and happily stuffed her cheeks.

Airi looked sadly at the diminished meat on her plate, then pulled another giant boiled crab from the storage case and began wrestling with it once more.

"That's right. If Seina-kun agrees to the practical training, I'll have Kiriko-chan return to military service for a while. As a military observer."

"The military side… Understood."

After that, the two continued eating crab in silence until they were satisfied.

The next day, shortly after noon, the students disembarked from the training ship that had arrived at the Academy and returned directly to their dormitories. Seina then headed to the principal's office with Amane.

“Summoned… Could it be about leaving without permission during training?”

“Probably the pirate incident. You wouldn't be summoned for something like leaving without permission. It'd be a written explanation or a minor punishment duty at most.”

“What about the incident where Seiryo-sensei was taken…”

“Ha! Serves him right! Good thing no students got hurt.” Amane smiled genuinely, looking delighted. “This means I won't have to see that guy's face for a while. Thanks a million, pirates.”

“Aren't you worried?”

“I do feel sorry for the pirates. But well, he is merchandise, after all. I'm sure they're treating him with respect. You met them, right? Komachi Kyō.”

“Yeah… she did seem polite, I suppose…”

“But?”

“Because she seemed like such a serious person…”

Seina remembered how Komachi disliked Seiryo's somewhat self-centered actions, and that made him worry.

“Surprisingly, she might try to discipline that guy and end up digging herself into a hole, ha ha ha.”

“A hole?”

“When he was seven, there was this teacher from another star system. He was a promising newcomer called to the Academy, but since he didn't know about the Tennan family, he tried desperately to discipline that idiot and got crushed. He said he felt the limits of his own educational theory and went back to his country. With that idiot, precisely because he has surprisingly high basic abilities, the more serious people are, the more they try to help him out, you see. But that idiot's stupidity is hardwired at the genetic level. It's best to just accept him as that kind of creature.”

“Did you ever try to help him, Amane-sensei?”

“No way. That genetic moron tried to lift my skirt, got chased by my pet Garga, peed himself, rolled down the hill crying, fell into the sea, and was found three hours later caught in a gillnet. Not once since he was a little boy."

Her matter-of-fact tone betrayed genuine loathing for Seiryo. Judging it too dangerous to continue this topic, Seina fell silent. Fortunately, the silence didn't last long.

“The principal's office is up ahead.”

The principal's office was located at the end of the connecting corridor extending from the

main building, where Amane pointed.

Amane knocked lightly on the door, and it opened automatically.

“Excuse me. I've brought Yamada Seina.” Amane saluted and said, then gestured with her eyes for Seina to follow.

The spacious, high-ceilinged principal's office had a solemn and serene atmosphere, almost like a cathedral. Seina's tension eased slightly when he noticed Mikami's calm expression.

“Come in.”

After Principal Mikami invited them to sit on the sofa, Seina was handed a document plate.

“…… Training? But isn't practical training supposed to start in the second year?” Seina asked after reading the contents of the plate without showing surprise.

However, Amane, watching beside him, instantly paled.

(I see… so the moat has already been filled in.) Amane realized why Kiriko wasn't there.

“The GP Academy is a place to train future GP members. First, students are taught versatile fundamentals. Based on their results, aptitude is assessed and selection is made. Of course, multiple options are prepared, allowing students to choose from them. After that, specialized knowledge for their chosen department is taught, they graduate, and proceed to their respective departments—that's the standard process. However, in your case, GP can only offer one option.”

“One…” Seina looked at Mikami with a calm expression, as if he already knew the answer.

Mikami gave a wry smile and let out a deep sigh.

“…Ever since you arrived from that early civilization, you've been nothing but an exception in every single way. Let me be clear: you can refuse this order. But in that case, consider yourself unable to remain at GP Academy or join the GP. You may still live at the Academy as before, attend a regular school, and seek other employment. That is guaranteed under the guardianship responsibilities of Airi-sama and Masaki Kiriko-san. Of course, you also have the option to return to Earth. Keep that in mind as you consider your choice.”

“Yes.”

“You will be assigned to the decoy division for your training. You are aware of that, correct?”

“…Yes. I understand.”

It was the same place Miki had gone for her practical training several months ago. After her unfortunate accident, Seina had researched it thoroughly and knew exactly what kind of place it was. He had also anticipated the high likelihood he himself would be assigned there in the future.

“During the recent training voyage, your training ship encountered pirates in a sector where pirate activity is virtually nonexistent. Based on the combined results so far, GP has concluded there is no doubt about your characteristics. Therefore, the GP's upper echelons have decided to urgently review how to handle you.”

“So they want to use him as bait to attract pirates?” Amane, who had been silent until then, said with a sullen expression.

“Well, that's essentially it. But this is the place that trains people like that.”

“This is where we cultivate that knowledge and resolve!”

“Of course, Yamada Seina-kun's special abilities are invaluable. Naturally, we'll provide every possible support. This is the practical training for that purpose.”

At Mikami's words, Amane said nothing more. Her exchange hadn't been about demanding the order be revoked; it had been a dialogue meant to make Seina aware of the gravity of the situation.

“Yamada Seina-kun. This is a crucial choice that will shape your future. You have one week to respond… Take your time. However, this is classified information, so choose your confidants carefully.”

“Ah, no. I accept the assignment for practical training in the decoy division.”

“Whoa, Seina!” Amane's face drained of color as she grabbed Seina's arm.

Mikami also stared at Seina in surprise.

But Seina began speaking calmly. “I've been thinking about what I can do in the GP. So when they said Decoy Division, it wasn't surprising or anything…”

“But Seina-chan, you haven't received proper training yet.”

“True, I thought the practical training would start in my second year… It's sudden, but that's just how it always is.” For unlucky Seina, misfortune always struck without warning.

“Seina… Are you sure? Why not at least think it over for one night?”

“The fact that Masaki-sensei isn't here means she already knows about this, right?”

“!!…… Ah, probably. It's best to assume Airi-sama heard about it first and already had a showdown.”

Amane glanced over at Mikami, partly to confirm, and Mikami nodded with a wry smile.

“But neither Airi-sama nor Kiriko are forcing Seina to go to the decoy division, you know.”

“For me, any other choice would just cause trouble for someone else… So going where I'm needed is the best thing for me too. Besides, both Kiriko-san and Airi-sama are certain I'll go

to the decoy division, and they know trying to persuade me is pointless, which is why they're not here… Even Miki-senpai.”

“!!”

Amane found herself staring at Seina's face. She saw no hesitation there, but it held a certain hint of danger.

(I get that it's nice to be needed by someone… but is that really all there is to it? I wish Kiriko and the others could support that too.)

“So you've made your decision, Yamada Seina-kun?”

“Yes.” Seina nodded firmly, his gaze fixed on Mikami.

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“Principal Mikami, what do you think about Seina-kun's behavior earlier?” Amane, who remained behind, asked uneasily, after Seina left the principal's office.

“I've decided to do everything in my power to ensure Seina-kun's safety. What you've noticed may be something you should solve yourself. Hahaha.”

“Me? …But—”

“Earlier, you mentioned this is a place to cultivate knowledge and resolve. But Seina-kun already possessed resolve and determination. Knowledge is something we can teach. True resolve and determination, however, are not something we can simply impose.”

“Resolve and determination, you say…”

“Truthfully, I've seen many graduates, but a student with Seina-kun's level of will is extremely rare. Hehehe, so despite my age, I found myself getting a little flustered.” Mikami said, her cheeks flushing slightly.

“Mikami-sama!?… Seriously?”

“Hehe.”

(…Why does Seina have such a knack for attracting these intense types?) Amane clutched her head and let out a deep sigh.

With Seina's transfer to the decoy division approved, the plan was brought forward by a week. The day after he received his appointment was set aside for preparation, with departure the day after that.

That very night, a small dinner party was held at Amane’a penthouse. Airi hosted, with Kiriko and Karen assisting, and an abundance of food was prepared—so much it couldn't all

fit on the large dining table. For this occasion, Hakuren and the others participated in the dinner not as maids, but as guests.

“Well then, Seina-kun, I see you agreed to the practical training in the decoy department, huh? Heh heh heh. Let's begin the dinner. Cheers, and bon appétit!”

With Airi's abbreviated toast, everyone except Seina raised their glasses of sake. Before the toast had even ended, Airi promptly stuffed food into her mouth and began chugging sake straight from the bottle.

“Airi-sama, just because you're hungry… couldn't you show a little restraint?”

“Well, it's a rather… ambiguous assignment, neither truly joyous nor truly somber.”

Faced with a feast that looked enough to give anyone heartburn, Elma said with a hint of confusion. “But seriously… you're a big shot at GP Academy, so couldn't you at least give a proper greeting?”

“Shut up. I'm sick of saying that stuff all the time! My shoulders are killing me!” Airi glared at Amane while crunching through the thick bone of a meat-on-the-bone dish she’d stuffed into her mouth.

“Seina-sama. If you're being transferred to the Decoy Division, does that mean you won't be returning here anymore?”

“No, what's decided for now is a one-month schedule, Karen-san.”

“This time, we'll set out on a number of different voyages to gather data. After verifying that, we'll make several more data-gathering voyages, and then we'll go into full operation. Either way, Seina-chan's deployments will be somewhat planned, and there will be more classified matters, so we'll keep our base here.”

“Ha ha ha! Karen-chan, are you sad about parting with Seina-kun?”

“N-no, not at all… um…” Karen flushed red at Airi's teasing and fled to the kitchen with the empty dishes Airi had set aside.

“Ahahahaha! How adorable. What about Hakuren-chan, Gyokuren-chan, and Suiren-chan?” Airi, already transformed into a drunken old man, started pestering Hakuren and the other girls too.

“Whoa! Airi-sama's pace is fast!”

Before the stunned Amane and the others, Hakuren had slipped into her bad habit of daydreaming.

“Huh, I… I…”

“Oh! Hakuren-chan's time bomb switch has been flipped. Well then, let's go to Gyokuren-chan first… no, Suiren-chan?” Airi staggered to her feet and walked past Gyokuren to

Suiren's side.

“Hey, Suiren-chan. What do you, usually so quiet, think about Seina-kun?” Airi asked, as she clung to Suiren, holding her close so she couldn't escape.

“Hey, Kiriko… she’s jumping around a lot. What's going on?”

“Even while cooking, she drinks quite a bit under the pretense of tasting the food.”

“What should we do? Stop her?”

“Lately, Mikami-sama told me Airi-sama's stress is through the roof, so I should let her let loose a little.”

“We wouldn't want her exploding at some weird moment, after all.”

Amane, Kiriko, and Elma started whispering on the other side of the table. Whether she knew it or not, Airi's clinginess was getting worse and worse.

“Hey, hey, Suiren-chan. Would you be lonely if Seina-kun wasn't around?”

“……Yes, I would.” Suiren blushed bright red and whispered.

“Ahahahaha~~~, how cute! Hey Seina-kun, Suiren-chan said she'd be lonely.”

“Ah, thank you.” Seina, like Suiren, answered with his face flushed bright red.

Seeing this, Airi looked satisfied and turned her gaze toward Gyokuren this time .

“Gyokuren-chan is… I'll stop myself.”

“Oh my, Airi-sama. Why won't you ask me?”

“Eeeeeh~, well, because I already know the answer.”

“You're making surprisingly sensible judgments, Kiriko.”

Overhearing Amane's whispered words, “What do you mean 'surprisingly sensible'? Fine, I'll ask! Gyokuren-chan, go ahead.”

With a pop, Airi placed her hand on Gyokuren's shoulder.

“Seina-sama… I pray you won't push yourself too hard and return safely.”

“……”

Everyone present, except Hakuren, was rendered speechless by Gyokuren's unexpectedly proper words and her pure, gentle smile.

“Oh dear, what's the matter, everyone?”

“That's not fair, Gyokuren-chan! Trying to make yourself look good!”

“Oh ho ho ho ho.”

Gyokuren's refined laughter must have rubbed Airi the wrong way.

“What the hell! That's infuriating! It's only right to offer a night of kindness to a soldier heading into battle, isn't it?! Take it off! I'll take it off for you!” Saying this, Airi lunged at Gyokuren, trying to strip her clothes off.

Just then, “Yes! Whether it's a naked apron or an oversized shirt, I'll prepare anything, Seina-sama!”

Hakuren stood up and shouted at the perfect moment. The impeccable timing and content left everyone except Hakuren speechless for an instant, then they all burst out laughing simultaneously.

“Ahahahaha~~~ Hey, hey, Seina-chan, which do you prefer—a naked apron or an oversized shirt?” Airi asked Seina while clinging to Gyokuren.

This triggered Airi's stress-relieving old man mentality to melt away, and the atmosphere became warm and friendly.

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About three hours later, the dinner party ended when Airi passed out drunk. Seina headed to his bathroom to prepare for tomorrow, Hakuren and Gyokuren took Airi to the guest room to sleep, Elma went to her room, and Kiriko stayed in the kitchen with Karen to clean up.

“Hey, Kiriko. I need to talk to you for a moment, okay?” Amane waited until the cleanup was mostly done before calling out to Kiriko.

“What is it, Amane?”

“Looks like we won't get a chance tomorrow.”

“About Seina-chan?”

“Well, it's not a big deal, but it's been on my mind.”

“Got it. Karen, I'll leave the rest to you.”

“Would you like some tea?”

“No need. It won't take that long.” Saying that, Amane left the kitchen with Kiriko.

The two walked straight through the dining room and stepped out onto the balcony. A pleasant sea breeze was blowing. Below them, the yacht harbor was lined with illuminated luxury cruisers. With no major city light sources nearby, the night sky sparkled with

countless stars, reminding them once more that this was the penthouse of a luxury apartment building. And there she stood, Amane—her elegant demeanor betraying her refined upbringing despite her casual tank top and cut-off jeans, her goddess-like beauty making even this opulent backdrop seem like a supporting role.

(She really is a picture-perfect sight, isn't she?)

Whether it was the unfamiliar scenery or the beautiful night, it felt like that sensation you got when looking down from a tall tower—your sense of balance warped, as if you might be sucked in.

“Hm? What's up, Kiriko? Daydreaming… You were staring at me, weren't you?”

Her tone, like a stone tossed into the surface of the moment's mood, snapped Kiriko back to her senses. While Amane's slightly gruff, blunt manner detracted from her charm, her sweet, slightly husky voice carried enough power to transform that very flaw into an asset. Having been the center of attention since childhood, Amane unconsciously used coarse language as a kind of self-defense mechanism to avoid drawing unnecessary attention.

“I'd like to say 'You've got to be kidding me…' but honestly, Amane really is picture-perfect.”

“Heh… But a place with this kind of atmosphere would suit Gyokuren better, wouldn't it?”

“Damn it! Stop it, that's no joke!”

Kiriko felt pleasure surge through her entire body, making her shiver. Gyokuren, a bundle of wickedness and forbidden pleasure, like a moon goddess, doubled in beauty at night. And the biggest problem was that, unlike Amane, Gyokuren had no intention of controlling that power.

“How many times have I held back from smashing this into her face…” Kiriko raised her trembling fist to her face.

“Your defense instincts are way too strong!… I can't even joke around carelessly with you.”

“…So, what's this about?” Kiriko looked away from Amane and took a deep breath to regain her composure.

“Ah, well… I noticed Seina seemed a little different than usual.” Amane began the conversation, recounting in detail what happened earlier that day at GP Academy when he received his assignment from Mikami.

“I know Seina wants to be needed and is trying to live up to that… but how should I put it… he seems to be putting too much pressure on himself. Of course, I haven't known him as long as you have, so I can't say for sure, but what do you think, Kiriko?”

Kiriko pondered Amane's words for a moment, as if weighing them carefully. Then, slowly, as if choosing her words, she began to speak.

“I've been concerned about Miki-san too… but since Seina-chan made his decision, you

know he won't change his mind, right? So we can only support him under the best possible conditions we can manage.”

“Well, if that's how you see it, Kiriko, that's fine. Sorry to take up your time when you're so busy.”

“I'm glad you care about the details, Amane. Thank you.”

Confirming that they weren't alone in bearing Seina's misfortune, and that their mutual concerns had been dispelled, the two looked at each other and smiled.

“Kiriko leaves tomorrow, right?”

“Yes. I'll leave the rest to you.”

The next day, Kiriko left before Seina and the others woke up. The day after that, Seina also headed to the GP headquarters. However…

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“What should I do…” Inside the GP base, Seina was lost.

The satellite map of the GP base displayed on Seina's device showed a grid of intricate yet simple corridors. However, it was broken up in places, giving it the appearance of a maze. He walked while checking his location, but yet again, a wall not marked on the map stood before him.

“Not again… The maps are updated every week, so this construction must have started within the last week. Even so, the floor where the decoy department is located seems pretty desolate, like there's no one there…”

It felt like he'd wandered from a busy downtown area into a building under construction in the middle of the night.

“Hmmmm. But it's still a bit of a problem that there's no one here.” Seina drew a dead-end line on the screen with a confused look, then headed back to the previous fork.

“If I'd known this, I would've brought NB along instead of shipping him…”

Through the full-length windows along the outer perimeter corridor, he could see outer space and the Academy's home planet. For a moment, captivated by the magnificent panorama, Seina forgot his predicament. Then, a large cargo ship passed directly in front of him. A faint humming sound, inaudible on other floors, echoed through the empty floor. After the cargo ship passed, silence returned once more—just then, Seina noticed something like a humming tune drifting in from the distance.

“…Is anyone there?”

Seina walked slowly, making sure his footsteps didn't drown out the humming. As it drew nearer, he became certain that he recognized the familiar voice.

“Just as I thought!”

Around the corner, Mitoto was diligently cleaning the hallway, wearing the same uniform she had worn when they first met.

“Mitoto-san!”

“Huh? Oh my~ It's Seina-chan. Long time no see~” Mitoto happily ran toward Seina.

(Hmm. She really is adorable, this person.)

She was like a puppy that hadn't yet developed strong legs finding its mother and coming running happily, toddling along.

“You look well. Hey, what are you doing here?”

“Actually, I'm supposed to go to the decoy department for practical training… and I'm a bit lost.”

“Oh, I see. There's construction going on everywhere right now, isn't there? Well then, let me show you around.”

“But aren't you supposed to be working…”

“I'll get my work done. Come with me.” Mitoto flashed a bright smile and started moving forward while mopping the floor.

Seina, who had felt a little uneasy, followed Mitoto with a sigh of relief. But at that moment, Seina had forgotten something important.

The outer ring encircling the GP Academy's solar system like a birdcage contained nearly fifty sections, including those under construction. Yet only five formed complete, connected rings: one for civilian use, one for GP exclusive use, one for the Academy, and the last two were privately owned by two philosophers.

The Galactic Army battleship “Linamix” launched from the large dock at the Galactic Navy's 278th Base, located within the GP-exclusive ring. Once sufficiently distant from the ring, the Linamix entered the newly constructed hyperspace gate. Normally, a hyperspace gate required two units to connect two locations. However, this new type of gate, being one-way, did not require a gate at the destination.

After entering the gate and passing through hyperspace, the Linamix emerged in normal space a few minutes later, several hundred light years away from Galaxy Academy.

“No abnormalities detected on the ship!”

“Errors are within the expected range”

The operators' reports echoed across the bridge.

Despite being a battleship, the bridge was surprisingly compact: five operator stations and two intelligence officer seats on a slightly elevated platform. The captain's chair sat a bit further back and higher. Yet Captain Raizu Romurea, who should have been seated there, stood beside the intelligence officer's station.

“Finally, you've brought it to a usable level. Kiriko-kun is amazing. Sorry for making you come all the way here.”

Seated at the intelligence officer's station was Kiriko, dressed in military uniform.

“Not at all. It's all part of the mission.”

“But you've had your share of misfortune… No, my apologies. He’s like a younger brother to you. But this was a real disaster for us. To lose someone with the skills to become Chief Intelligence Officer on the military's flagship, all because GP Academy took you as an “instructor”.

“This was beyond my control. I'm a servant of the GP. I can't make such decisions myself.”

“But finally, both you and that fellow… are coming to where you truly belong. I guess that’s a good thing.”

“As you know, Yamada Seina-kun is an early civilization individual granted special permission to go into space. Even daily life required him to learn so many things, so the flexibility of the instructor position was a real help. While he caused the military some trouble, I must admit I was grateful for many aspects of it.”

“Hmm, I see. That might be true. Well, if the result is good, who cares about the process?”

At that moment, the operator's voice echoed across the bridge. “Captain! Unidentified vessels detected at 070 degrees. Number three!”

“Distance 1050. They appear to have detected us. Approaching.”

Kiriko swiftly analyzed the operator's report. “Two pirate ships belonging to the Da Ruma Guild. The remaining vessel is unidentified, but it's a modified ship classified as D-4.”

Kiriko projected the data onto the main screen. Meanwhile, Captain Raizu, who had returned to the captain's chair, quickly reviewed the data displayed on the screen.

“Sinking this level of force would be easy… but the mission takes priority now. Accelerate

and break away.”

“Finding this ship with its storming block engaged… just a coincidence?” Kiriko's puzzled question was answered immediately.

“Captain, Code 064! Non-crew activity detected in E-13 corridor!”

“Verify ID, hurry!”

Before the captain could finish the order, Kiriko had already identified the figure. Instantly, the ship's camera feed and the individual's ID information flashed onto the display.

“Damn it… Kuramitsu Mitoto-sama, huh…”

Reflexively, the captain looked up to the ceiling in exasperation, then noticed another person beside Mitoto and quickly looked at the monitor.

“The other one… got caught up in cleaning with Mitoto-sama?”

“Seina-chan…”

“What!?”

The displayed footage clearly showed Mitoto and Seina cleaning.

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In the Linamix’s passageway, Mitoto held a mop, and before he knew it, Seina had picked up a mop too and was cleaning.

“This spot's all clean now.”

Wiping sweat from her forehead, Mitoto looked back with satisfaction at the now sparkling passageway.

“Um, Mitoto-sama… By the way, is this the right way to the Decoy Department…?” Seina looked around curiously.

Mitoto, who had started sniffing the air, suddenly grabbed Seina's hand and began walking with a firm stride.

“Oh, that way?”

Leading a relieved Seina, Mitoto walked through the door labeled Dining Hall.

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The bridge's main monitor showed Mitoto happily eating pudding in the cafeteria, with Seina beside her, looking somewhat perplexed.

“Successfully detained in the Second Dining Hall!”

“Good. Close the bulkheads! Keep watch!”

“Roger!”

“But seeing it with my own eyes for the first time… How on earth does she manage to slip in? And to think we'd ever use this ship's anti-Mitoto-sama capture equipment…”

Watching the footage of Mitoto eating pudding, Captain Raizu let out a deep sigh and slumped back into his chair.

“I'm sorry, even my student…”

“No, it's an honor to have Yamada Seina-kun aboard. And I got to see his effects in action…”

“New emergency! Localized space distortion at starboard 150, they're jumping out!”

The captain and Kiriko flinched at the alert.

“Th-this reaction!” The operator's expression held something akin to despair. Suppressing the urge to cry out in frustration with the professional discipline honed through training, the operator reported the facts.

“Based on the distorted waveform and energy mass, there's no doubt about it—it's the Daidoros!”

The air in the bridge instantly grew tense, and the operators remained utterly silent.

Daidoros was not originally a ship name, but rather a heavily armed flagship battleship constructed by the Tarrant Guild—once said to surpass the Da Ruma Guild—using its vast financial resources and technological prowess. To this day, it remained a pirate vessel etched in the memories of the Galactic Federation as a source of terror. Among mass-produced ships, it was still considered the strongest in single-ship combat. It had even sunk flagship-class battleships of the GP military when encountered alone. Since most Daidoros-class battleships built in the past were destroyed by Imperial Ships, this Daidoros-class battleship was said to be the last confirmed one.

“Daidoros… Tarrant Shank. Of all people, him!”

But even facing the Daidoros, choosing to “run” was no easy decision for a military battleship captain. Especially when the enemy was a vicious foe that had slaughtered countless comrades. It was the only ship permitted to be sunk immediately upon sight, without warning. Its sperm whale-like silhouette was truly the monster of the cosmic ocean, the “Moby Dick” of space.

“Report Daidoros sighting to HQ! Use gravity depth charges to stall it while we accelerate to maximum speed and perform random jumps to points unaffected by space distortion! Escape at all costs!” Clenching his fist tightly, Captain Raizu issued the order with a strained voice.

“Gravity depth charges launched!”

The depth charges launched from the rear of the Linamix reached the space ahead of the Daidoros and detonated. Their explosive force would reduce the speed of a normal ship to near zero. Leaving the Daidoros engulfed in the explosion behind, the Linamix attempted to escape the sector at maximum acceleration.

The bridge of the Daedros remained perfectly still, even in the face of the devastating depth charge attack. Aside from the individual seats, the space was composed entirely of silver metal, resembling a gigantic food processing plant.

“Kukukuku…”

Tarrant, with silver hair, tanned skin, and a beautifully chiseled face, stared intently at the Linamix with a gaze tinged with madness. The Linamix displayed on the central main monitor looked like prey about to be butchered and cooked. When Tarrant shifted his gaze to the small monitor beside him.

“Is that the target we've been talking about?”

A young lieutenant approached Tarrant with a smile.

“That's right. Make sure they bring her back alive this time. Everything else, just enjoy yourselves as usual.”

“Still, they're a rotten bunch, aren't they? I bet that ship's carrying people who've become a nuisance to them too, right?”

“Yes, it seems so. But this time there's prey worth it.” Saying that, Tarrant stared at the monitor displaying Masaki Kiriko.

Then, rising slowly, he said, “I'll start preparing. I'll leave this to you.” Placing a hand on his second-in-command's shoulder, he vanished into the private passageway.

“Understood.” With the lieutenant's words, the tension on the bridge eased.

“Okay! As soon as we reach tractor beam range, match speed to the target. Hurry!”

The Linamix’s operator's voice was almost a scream. “Impossible! The enemy's relative velocity hasn't changed! We're within tractor beam range!”

Simultaneously, several tractor beams shot through the explosions, instantly locking onto the desperately accelerating Linamix. It was like a predator sinking its teeth into its prey's throat.

A violent jolt slammed into Linamix's bridge. Crew members, off-balance yet clinging to their stations, fought back the urge to scream.

“All weapons, fire at Daidoros! Ignore any damage to us!”

At Captain Raizu's command, all weapons that could be aimed at the tractor beam emitter and Daidoros were fired, from the main guns to the machine guns.

“As long as we're being towed, there’s no missing it.” Yet Captain Raizu's words, despite their content, sounded like a prayer.

Energy capable of destroying planets itself concentrated on Daidoros, and the shockwaves from that energy also damaged Linamix's hull. Finally, the gun barrels reached their limit. Insulating gel was injected to cut off the short circuits caused by energy overload. With small steam explosions from the extreme heat, the weapons shut down one after another.

“No, it's no good! We can't cut the tractor beam. We’re being dragged in!”

With all weapons failing to fire simultaneously, it was a death sentence for them.

(Could this attack be…?)

Captain Raizu recalled rumors of intentional manipulation of information and personnel assignments, with Tarrant dispatched to eliminate troublesome individuals. Even within Linamix, several hasty personnel changes had occurred before this experimental voyage.

(Sudden personnel changes weare common when special experiments are conducted, but considering the nature of this experiment, many of those transfers seemed unnecessary… Could it be!?)

Captain Raizu glanced at Kiriko, trying not to look too concerned. This experiment was for intercepting pirates when using Seina as bait. The military division's plan was to transfer Seina to the Decoy Division, significantly increase the military division's influence, and eventually restore the GP's chain of command to the structure from the Galactic Federation's founding days.

(But it's also true that some view Kiriko-kun monitoring Yamada Seina with concern. She's far too close to him. And what's more… Dammit! Focus on what's right in front of you!) Captain Raizu clenched his fists and closed his eyes, as if to blow away such extraneous thoughts.

“……”

Kiriko stared at the monitor showing Seina buried beneath a mountain of collapsed pudding and Mitoto, her expression agonized. After a moment, as if resolved, she connected her private memory to Linamix’s computer with astonishing speed. Then she loaded several programs.

“Captain!” Kiriko used a dedicated line to transmit and display a plan to Captain Raizu.

After quickly reviewing it, Captain Raizu looked at Kiriko in surprise.

“How foolish. Do you really think such recklessness will be permitted…”

But Kiriko silently rose from her seat, slowly placed her left hand on the armor on the floor, and made a gesture as if she was lightly grabbing something.

“!…… Understood. I'll do as you say.”

Captain Raizu looked from Kiriko straight ahead to the main monitor, who saluted and ran out of the bridge.

“Broadcast Z01 to all crew!”

“Z01! …Roger!” The operator, startled, reflexively tried to look toward the captain, but remembering their situation, immediately switched to Plan Z01.

“Are Mitoto-sama and Yamada Seina still there?”

“Yes! …What!? I've lost them both!”

The monitors showed no trace of the two who had been there moments before. And the pudding scattered across the floor from the earlier impact had been meticulously cleaned up.

“Damn it! They cleaned up the pudding that fell on the floor… Ship-wide search, hurry! Secure them immediately and throw them into an escape pod!”

“Daidoros approaching! Confirming launch of assault tubes. One is heading for the central block of Linamix.”

“They intend to torment us to the bitter end… Alright, use that location as the base point and activate Z01!”

In the military, performance is crucial, but reliability is equally vital. Mass-produced equipment that could withstand harsh environments while maintaining performance—unless you were a special unit, you wouldn't be issued cutting-edge, high-performance weapons with limited usage data. But Tarrant and his crew? They were lavishly using custom-made gear. Even for the military, eliminating them was difficult.

“Z01 activated! All bulkheads in each passageway switched to manual operation via biometric authentication. Escape pods deployed!”

“Given the damage to Daidoros's outer hull, we can't sink it with a Linamix’s self-destruct, but at this range, we should be able to inflict significant damage.”

“If the pods launched during the self-destruction have even a slight chance of survival…”

Captain Raizu looked at the spot where Kiriko had been moments before. A distinct handprint was imprinted on the floor there.

(The bridge is covered in reinforced special steel. Even the most advanced Guardian would struggle to damage it. Yet she did it so easily…)

Kiriko was descended from the Jurai and Masaki families. Rumors had circulated that she might be a spy for Seto due to her exceptional abilities. But as long as Jurai held the upper hand in decision-making for both the GP and the Academy, there was no need for spies to obtain information. She was merely an internal investigator and monitor. There was little point in eliminating her.

(You fools, unable to forget past glories! Not understanding the benefits her abilities bring to the military… Don't die, Kiriko-kun)

Needle-like penetration tubes extended from the Daidoros, melting through Linamix's armor to invade. Simultaneously, they infiltrated the systems, cutting off the internal defense mechanisms.

“Kyahahahaha!”

The intrusion tube's hatch opened. Heavily armed pirates burst out one after another, laughing obscenely. Their expressions showed not a shred of doubt or remorse about what they were about to do.

After dozens of assault personnel had emerged, Tarrant Shank himself appeared, accompanied by two pirates flanking him, his footsteps slow and deliberate, a faint smirk on his face.

“Another miss… That's three in a row now.”

“My best run was five times. You're still doing pretty well.”

Tarrant chuckled at his two dissatisfied subordinates. “I'll bring you souvenirs, so stay put and mind the fort.” Saying that, he set off down a different path from the other pirates.

“That's the woman we're after, right? Is that really okay?”

“She seems boring. Once we don't need her anymore, I'll give her to you guys.”

“Ah, thank you! Take care!”

Raising his hand in response to his subordinates' cheers, Tarrant aimed at the alarm plate and swung his fist. Thud! Tarrant's non-materialized Guardian punched a large hole through it, smashing the alarm plate to pieces.

“Still can't lock onto those two?”

“Engagements with pirates are breaking out everywhere. They're moving… skillfully through the chaos, making contact difficult.”

The movement paths of Mitoto and Seina displayed on the monitor resembled the flight of a

fly—dizzyingly rapid and abrupt.

“Damn! Indeed, Mitoto-sama's movement patterns are so effective they're used as military combat evasion tactics.”

“However, Mitoto-sama's actions seem to be disrupting the pirates as well. So far, there have been almost no casualties.”

Kiriko was concealed inside an inspection hatch near the entrance of Daidoros's assault tube. She was operating the program loaded earlier on Linamix's bridge, performing a reverse access into Daidoros's computer and feeding it dummy data.

(…Good. For a while, the intruders won't notice anything abnormal with Daidoros.)

Kiriko shed her uniform and clenched her fist tightly. Instantly, her pure white GP military-spec undersuit transformed into a black combat suit.

Emerging cautiously through the inspection hatch while surveying the area, Kiriko used a small surveillance probe to confirm the status of the guards at the entry point.

(Multi-sensor equipment… Optical camouflage won't work. I'd rather not use it much, since I don't know what's on the other side.)

Suddenly, Kiriko's figure began to fade, blending into the background. Performing a series of short-range jumps into subspace, she slipped past the two guards. Materializing just before the transfer ring inside the tube, she plunged in without hesitation.

Amidst the blaring emergency alarms, Seina was sinking into despair over his own carelessness. He hadn't realized this wasn't the GP headquarters floor, and he'd let Mitoto drag him into cleaning up the mess that was the cause of it.

“So many people warned me cleaning with Mitoto-sama was dangerous… I should have remembered seeing Onnainin-san frantically snatch Mitoto-sama's mop away on the way to GP Academy…” Seina, having snatched Mitoto's mop, scanned the area, searching for clues about this place.

“Seina-chaaan, my mopppp~”

Beside him, Mitoto was desperately stretching out her hand, half-crying, trying to get the mop back. Seeing Mitoto acting like a little child, with an utterly adorable gesture, Seina found himself almost wanting to give the mop back.

“No! Besides, that alarm's been going off forever. We need to figure out where we are first, okay?” He said, trying to reason with her.

“???????…… Oh my, you're right. Oh dear, this is bad.” Mitoto finally began looking around,

saying this in a voice devoid of tension.

Then, suddenly starting to walk with a patter, she pointed at a man who appeared from the side passageway.

“Should we ask that person?”

“Huh?” Seina looked in the direction Mitoto was pointing and felt an intense sense of danger, like every hair on his body stood on end.

There stood Tarrant, smiling, about to aim his gun at Mitoto. Yet Mitoto approached Tarrant without the slightest hesitation, completely unguarded.

“Um, excuse me, I have a question…”

Mitoto was saved because Tarrant noticed Seina.

“You!”

Seina seized the moment the gun aimed at Mitoto paused and hurled the mop he held like a spear.

“Guh!”

Tarrant hadn't considered the mop as a weapon. The Guardian hadn't recognized the mop as a threat. And Seina's highly Bio-Enhanced physique created a split-second opening. Seina grabbed Mitoto and fled.

Kiriko emerged from the transfer ring on Daidoros' side and immediately performed a sub-space shift. However, sensing no human presence there, she instantly materialized.

“This is……”

Position-wise, it should have been the front section of Daidoros, but there was only a vast, empty space, like a giant warehouse.

“Giant though it may be, considering its external dimensions, it's actually quite small. That difference must be the thickness of the armor… And inside, armor identical to the outer walls has been formed, making it look like some kind of high-pressure test chamber or hazardous waste incinerator… Ugh!” Kiriko instinctively held her breath.

More than the interior's strangeness, she couldn't endure the foul stench filling the space. Kiriko recognized the repulsive odor, but she forced herself not to think about it as she started running.

(To the bridge, no matter what) Kiriko's thoughts shifted back into combat mode.

Seina held Mitoto in his arms as he desperately ran away. He used corners and small protrusions to avoid Tarrant's sniper fire, careful not to be targeted. Seina was sensitive to malice, honed by a lifetime of experience. That refined intuition, combined with reflexes gained through Bio-Enhancement, allowed him to sense the instant Tarrant fired and dodge.

“Wow… Seina-chan, you're amazing!” Mitoto praised Seina in a relaxed voice, impressed by how he dodged Tarrant's attacks as if he could predict them.

“Huh… quite impressive.” Like Mitoto, Tarrant was also impressed by Seina's evasion skills.

But alas, this was unlucky Seina for you. At every turn, he encountered pirates engaged in combat with guards.

(Whoa! Here too!)

After encountering pirates multiple times, an unspoken coordination had formed: Mitoto would break free from Seina's grasp and dash forward, delivering a flying kick to the pirates from behind, then Seina would run past them. Yet each time, Tarrant's gunfire prevented the pirates from joining the fight against the guards they were already engaged with.

Clack-clack. The sound of Tarrant's footsteps behind them threatened to stir up unpleasant memories for Seina. Suppressing that temptation, Seina focused on escaping. But as he rounded the corner, a hopelessly straight, unobstructed passageway stretched out before him.

(We have no choice!)

The hesitation lasted only an instant. Mitoto felt the same. Mitoto and Seina sprinted at full speed, Seina positioning himself to shield Mitoto. When they reached the halfway point of the corridor, Tarrant entered the straight corridor.

“Kukukuku!” Seeing Mitoto and Seina desperately fleeing, Tarrant laughed.

“Well, killing them would be no fun. I need them to slow down…” Taking a deep breath, Tarrant turned his head sideways, extended his gun-wielding hand, and fired without aiming.

“!”

By the skin of his teeth, Seina managed to dodge it, but he lost his balance slightly, slowing his running speed. As if he had been waiting for that, Tarrant moved swiftly. This time, he steadied his gun, aimed carefully, and fired at Seina's shoulder.

“Guh!”

It happened in an instant. Simultaneously with Tarrant's shot, Seina was suddenly shoved as if by a heavy weight, crashing violently into the wall at the end of the corridor.

(Was I shot?) Thinking this, Seina glanced sideways, prioritizing Mitoto's safety over his own.

In the shadows of the corridor, he saw Mitoto's tearful face, still being held by the guard as they moved away. Then, he noticed the guard who had taken cover around the corner and started firing. He realized the impact he felt came from a guard who had rushed out to shield him only when he locked eyes with Tarrant, who had made his Guardian semi-solid and started running toward them.

(Is he targeting me?) Seina instinctively felt it.

“Run… That's Tarrant.” The wounded guard, despite his injuries, tried to push Seina behind him into the corridor's shadows.

“Tarrant? …Ah!” Seina remembered that name was the one Komachi had warned him to be wary of.

“He's the vicious bastard who attacked the relay base the other day… So run!” The guard's words were meant to somehow get the stunned Seina to flee.

Ironically, though, it had the opposite effect.

(The relay base! So that bastard… Miki-senpai …)

Though wounded and leaning weakly against Seina, the guard was still trying to fire his gun. Seina shoved him toward the other guard.

“This is the one!”

Then he ran off in the opposite direction from where the guards were.

“You!”

Tarrant's Guardian arm blocked the path of the guard who tried to stop Seina, clutching his wounded comrade. The extended Guardian arm slammed the guard's gun—along with the guard himself—into the wall at the end of the corridor.

“Don't interfere!”

Tarrant's mind was already fixated solely on capturing Seina. And the skill Seina had shown in evasion thus far had actually worked in the guards' favor. Prioritizing Seina's capture, Tarrant deemed it sufficient to destroy the guard's gun. He gave it only a glance before immediately setting off in pursuit of Seina.

Kiriko reached Daidoros' bridge without much difficulty. The officers and operators were engrossed in watching the footage from Linamix's various surveillance cameras and the pirate invaders' point-of-view feeds, completely unaware of Kiriko's infiltration. The atmosphere was so relaxed it was hard to believe this was a bridge in the midst of combat, and the images displayed on the monitors were nauseating.

Kiriko took advantage of their focus on the monitors to begin checking Daidoros's

information from a terminal.

(…What is this? This isn't the bridge!)

The actions she could control from this location were severely limited, and only the bare minimum information was stored in this terminal.

(Using this type of terminal means Tarrant doesn't trust his crew. Though it's a fairly common setup among pirates, so I'm not surprised…!?).

As Kiriko tried to think of countermeasures, she noticed the second-in-command muttering to himself.

“Heh heh heh… Who'd have thought Yamada Seina would be here. Seeing him with Kuramitsu Mitoto, looks like he got dragged into the cleanup too… What rotten luck.”

(Seina-chan!) Kiriko spotted Yamada Seina being chased by Tarrant in one of the split screens.

“That vicious bastard who attacked the relay base the other day… So run!”

Kiriko understood perfectly how much the security guard's words from the monitor were unsettling Seina. And just as she'd expected, Seina had used himself as bait.

(Why did I take Amane's words so lightly!? Even though I knew Seina-chan has such bad luck!) Kiriko witnessed Amane's fears becoming reality before her eyes.

“Still, if Tarrant-sama is so fixated on Yamada Seina alone, I should have gone too… Heh heh heh…”

Kiriko, who felt immense disgust at the sight of overwhelming power trampling the weak solely for their own pleasure, felt an uncontrollable rage toward the men laughing at Seina, who had shielded the crew and offered himself as bait. And that rage instantly reached its peak.

By then, Kiriko possessed no trace of reason, let alone willpower. She had become a solid mass of murderous intent, harboring unimaginable power.

Suddenly, with a sharp pop—a sound like air rapidly escaping—the lieutenant's head vanished. It was as if it had simply dissipated into mist.

“Huh? What was that?”

The operators, noticing the mist-like spray hitting their necks, looked up in unison. They saw Kiriko standing behind the deputy commander, who was spurting blood like a fountain.

“Hii!”

The operators' faces contorted in terror, but they only had that one instant to recognize her.

(Damn! Damn! Damn! Damn! Damn! Damn! Damn!)

Seina cursed himself as he fled down the corridor.

His will to avenge Miki clashed with his body, which instinctively fled knowing it was impossible. He was consumed by rage at his own powerlessness.

(Damn! Damn! Damn! Damn! Damn! Damn! Damn!)

For Seina, the danger of death was a daily presence. And even that resolve wasn't something conscious; it was simply a matter of course within him. That was precisely why others avoided Seina, not wanting to get involved, and why Seina avoided others, not wanting to involve them.

Yet, there were still people who reached out to Seina. People from Masaki village like Kiriko, Kai, and Tsukiko; members of the Masaki family like Tenchi and Kiyone; people he met after ascending into space, starting with Mitoto and Seto… and Miki.

(Damn! Damn! Damn! Damn! Damn! Damn! Damn!)

The thought of what Miki had gone through filled Seina with unbearable rage. How terrifying her ordeal must have been, how she must have died… And all the fallen people he'd seen while fleeing here… Those people surely had friends and family who felt the same pain he did. Thinking of their grief made him feel like he was going mad.

When he first heard about the strange rules between the GP and the pirates, he didn't really get it. But now, he understood it all too well. Even with all this advanced science, human casualties were irreversible. Once a chain of grief was set in motion, the fighting turned into a quagmire. The GP couldn't afford the time or expense to hunt down pirates, while pirates didn't want the GP to beef up security or start an all-out war—that was the strange rule between them.

Tarrant possessed a choice and power that Seina lacked—the power to make people happy or miserable. Depending on Tarrant's mood, the lives and deaths of others hung in the balance.

(I hate that bastard!)

It was the first hatred Seina had ever felt—a hatred for the power and choice Seina had always craved, the power and choice that should come naturally to any human. Seina felt intense disgust at how Tarrant wielded that power and choice solely for his own convenience, for his own desires. But more than that , Seina hated his own powerlessness, hated the misfortune of meeting Tarrant before gaining the strength to protect anyone.

“What a letdown. All your momentum just vanished… Well, never mind. I'll enjoy the rest of this in Daidoros.” Tarrant aimed for Seina's leg.

Bang! Suddenly, the bulkhead behind Seina closed, and the energy blast was dispersed by

the barrier.

“Captain! Mitoto-sama is protected. One guard appears to be injured.”

“What about Yamada Seina?”

“Tarrant interfered, so her protection…”

“…I see. Just as rumored—a splendid decoy.”

On the ship's internal map Captain Raizu was viewing, several types of biological reactions were displayed in different colors. The light points representing all the pirates were moving, as if chasing the light point indicating Seina.

“Thanks to that, everyone except the guards has safely completed evacuation.”

“Good. Restore control of the bulkheads!”

“But there's a risk the enemy could hijack the system!”

“Just a portion is enough! We can't just leave that boy to die, can we?”

“Roger!”

As the operator restored control and closed the first bulkhead,

“Ahhh… it's Raizu-chan.” Mitoto appeared on the bridge with a voice that instantly relaxed the tension.

“Why did you bring her here?!”

“My apologies. I tried to stop her, but…”

“Captain! The bulkhead is about to be breached!”

The operator shouted, cutting off the escort guard who had brought Mitoto. The ship's surveillance feed showed Tarrant destroying the bulkhead with his Guardian.

“Damn! What a Guardian. This isn't going to buy us much time… Oh well. Mitoto-sama, this way.” Captain Raizu briefly explained the current situation to Mitoto, who had come up to the captain's chair.

“I see… By the way, I don't see the Information Processing Officer… Who is it?”

Mitoto's abilities were inherently extraordinary. With just Captain Raise's explanation and a glance around the bridge, she instantly grasped the precise situation.

“Masaki Kiriko.”

“Oh, well then, this should be quick.”

Mitoto clapped her hands happily, then scurried over to Kiriko's station. She activated several monitors and checked the program Kiriko had loaded.

“…Oh my, hmm hmm… Looks fine. Hey, could you transfer the bulkhead controls over here?”

“Huh? But—”

Most people only knew Mitoto for her strange rumors and didn't realize she actually possessed high operational skills. The operator looked troubledly at Captain Raizu.

“It's fine. Follow Mitoto-sama's instructions.”

“R-Right, understood!”

“Thank you.”

But the moment Mitoto took control, the operators' worries vanished. The pirates' movements were completely controlled, and actions like the guards' counterattack from a favorable position, repair crews moving to critical facilities, and support for Seina began to be executed effectively.

“I-It's incredible…” The operators stared in amazement at Mitoto's miraculous operation.

“Hey, Raizu-chan. Kiriko-chan is over there, right?”

“…Yes. But we still haven't received any contact…”

“I see… Oh, looks like she's back.”

“Huh!?”

“See? The life signs near the assault tube just disappeared.”

“…Wh-what the hell is this!?”

Captain Raizu looked where Mitoto was pointing and gasped in surprise. The life signs of the pirates positioned almost directly in line between Seina and the assault tube entrance were disappearing one after another.

Mitoto's frowned. “…Kiriko-chan, you're angry, aren't you… But you shouldn't be, Kiriko-chan.”

The pirates guarding the assault tube entrance had been watching Kiriko's snap image with lecherous eyes.

“Tarrant-sama said she seemed boring, but she's quite the beauty, isn't she?”

“Usually, by the end, he just turns them into a pile of meat. So that guy isn't really interested in their features. He cares about how lively they are and how well they cry out, apparently.”

“He's sick. Or should we call it a refined hobby?”

“When a hobby gets intense, he turns maniacal. It's the same with everything. We're just capturing that woman because she's connected to that Yamada Seina. Once we secure her, he'll probably just use her as bait. He probably won't even bother with anything else… Might even bring her back as a corpse…”

Their conversation ended there. Kiriko burst out with incredible force. What she did to them, no one knew. Only that a split second after she passed, the pirates' bodies bounced violently off the corridor walls like superballs. They fell, limbs twisted strangely like puppets with snapped strings.

Normally, an alarm would sound immediately if crew members were killed or injured on their own ship's bridge. Ironically, however, Tarrant, accustomed to the Daidoros's overwhelming firepower and equipment allowing him to easily crush his enemies, had grown complacent. He feared mutiny from his subordinates and guarded the core sections, but remained utterly oblivious to abnormalities on the bridge. The system failed to sound an alarm for the deaths of his executive officer and operators. And Tarrant himself, consumed by pursuing Seina, neglected his routine bridge checks. These conditions combined left the pirates aboard Linamix utterly defenseless against the threat that now threatened them.

Kiriko, crushing every pirate who came into her sight with minimal movement, was like a spiked iron ball launched at unimaginable speed, bouncing wildly through the corridors. Yet, instantly incapacitating heavily armed pirates took a tremendous physical toll on Kiriko. Her arms were so damaged that even the high-performance nanomachines could not keep up with their repair.

“!”

At that moment, a bulkhead controlled by Mitoto descended right before Kiriko's eyes as she spotted more pirates. Instantly, Kiriko changed course and sprinted off. Her objective was to reach Seina, not to annihilate the pirates. She had no intention of wasting time breaking through the bulkhead.

The bulkheads, lowered one after another, were calculated to give Kiriko intervals for physical repair while avoiding blocking the shortest route. Thanks to this, the accumulation of excessive damage was reduced, and Kiriko's arms were gradually regaining function.

× × ×

“Alright! If Kiriko-kun can protect Yamada Seina now, we can escape too. If things go well, we can take Tarrant and the pirates along with Linamix…”

“No! Seina-chan's response is gone!”

The life signs on the monitor vanished one after another, starting with Seina. This was the result of accumulated damage from the battle with the pirates and the indiscriminate destruction required to breach the sealed bulkheads.

“Not good. That one section is beyond our control.”

“Damn it! Of all times… Dispatch nearby guards immediately!”

“Haah, haah, haah, haah”

Rough breathing and beads of sweat. Fighting the temptation to strike back at Tarrant, Seina fled the pirates' attacks, his body and mind utterly exhausted. Without the bulkhead's cover, he might have been captured or killed already, but now he was cornered in a place where even that cover was no longer an option.

“Dammit… Is this it?!”

Standing at the center of a T-junction, Seina desperately searched for a way to escape. But the bulkheads to his left and right were being shattered by the pirates' attacks, and straight ahead, Tarrant's Guardian was tearing through the bulkhead. Flames erupted from the manual control panels on the bulkheads. Nowhere in that sealed passageway was there a room, let alone an inspection hatch. The ventilation ducts were integrated into the walls, making them impossible for Seina to access with his knife. The only fortunate thing was that this was the auxiliary reactor compartment, built sturdier than standard bulkheads. Even Tarrant's Guardian would struggle to destroy it.

“Haah, haah, haah, haah… haah…”

Seina steadied his ragged breath and stared intently at the bulkhead Tarrant was destroying. If he could slip through the gap created by the breached bulkhead to the other side, there might still be a chance to escape.

Bikiiiin! A harsh, high-pitched metallic sound was heard and part of the bulkhead cracked.

(He's coming!)

Contrary to Seina's tense anticipation, only a single small hole appeared in the bulkhead.

“There you are.”

From beyond the hole, Tarrant looked at Seina and smiled. Then, in the next instant, he saw the muzzle flash, followed by two gunshots.

“Guh!”

Sensing danger, Seina instinctively tried to dodge sideways, but felt an impact on his left leg and collapsed on the spot. Enduring the searing pain, Seina immediately checked the condition of his left leg.

(It pierced my outer thigh… No bleeding. If I hadn't dodged instantly, both legs would have been shot through.)

Seina's thigh bore a small scorched hole and surrounding skin burns. However, the wall hit by the stray bullet had a crator about ten centimeters wide. Seina's injury was minor thanks to the special fabric of his uniform dispersing the energy. Still, running was out of the question now.

Crack, pop. Tarrant used his Guardian to slowly pry open the bulkhead, which was now covered in cracks like the front glass of a car treated to prevent shattering. He did this to prevent Seina from escaping. But just as he made a hole large enough for one person to pass through, smoke began billowing from Tarrant's Guardian generator.

“That was close…” Tarrant casually tossed aside the Guardian generator and smiled at Seina.

“Never thought I'd run into you here, Yamada Seina.”

“Damn it!”

Seina rose, dragging his injured leg, and glared at Tarrant. Even as Tarrant approached him and slowly pressed the gun against his forehead, Seina didn't flinch.

“You… Miki-senpai…”

“Miki? Hmph. Seems you have a grudge against me too. But your grudge remains unavenged, while mine is settled.”

“Grievance?”

“Do you have any idea how much shame I endured as the son of an incompetent man who got arrested over a single GP ship? Because of that, I had to kill my father and my brother.”

Tarrant swiftly shifted the gun pressed against Seina's forehead to his right hand and fired.

“Damn it!”

Tarrant peered down at Seina, who collapsed, clutching his right hand, with keen interest.

“Still, GP student uniforms have come a long way. A direct hit from this thing should blow off an arm or leg easily enough, but heh heh heh.”

“Damn it!”

Feeling Tarrant's laughter as humiliation, Seina pushed himself up against the wall, clutching his painfully throbbing leg. He glared at him with every ounce of his being.

“Looks like we're in for quite a bit of fun. Kuku… Don't think you'll die so easily. I'll revive you again and again, and kill you again and again… Take you back to Daidoros and have my fill…!”

At that very moment, the bulkhead behind Tarrant shattered as if an explosion had occurred. Tarrant reflexively grabbed Seina around the neck, pulling him in front of him as a shield.

"……!!"

When Tarrant pressed the gun to Seina's head, Kiriko stood frozen in attack stance, barely a meter away. Her expression was hidden by her long hair and the hand thrust forward like a beast's jaw, but the distance was such that even the slightest delay in Tarrant's reaction would have meant his skull being crushed.

"Damn you!"

Tarrant reflexively fired at Kiriko, but she swiftly backed away, easily evading the shot.

"Don't move! Show yourself!"

Tarrant shouted again, pressing the gun against Seina's head. But when he saw Kiriko slowly raise her face, he froze, as if his soul had been sucked out.

"...Beautiful."
Beautiful and supple limbs. Her entire body was splattered with blood, and her eyes had an overpowering coldness in them. Tarant was entranced by Kiriko in an instant, and he even felt a strong desire.

"……Beautiful." Tarrant murmured involuntarily.

Beautiful and supple limbs. Her entire body was splattered with blood, and her eyes had an overpowering coldness in them. Tarrant was entranced by Kiriko in an instant, and he even felt a strong desire.

At that moment, the muzzle of Tarrant's gun, transfixed by Kiriko, shifted slightly away from Seina.

"!"

Sensing Tarrant's opening, Seina grabbed the special steel knife tucked in his pouch with his free left hand. It was the same one he'd used the other day on the training ship to cut through the gel restraining him to escape danger.

To country boys in the past, knives were important tools for living and playing in nature: shaving wood and bamboo to make playthings, peeling and cutting vegetables and fruits to make them easier to eat, shaving tree trunks to dig holes and catch insects. In Seina's case, it was a versatile tool, used for splints when injured, preparing medicinal herbs, and cutting bandages that he kept on hand. But it was a tool, not a weapon, and Seina never

once pointed it at anyone, nor did he ever think about it.

(Don't hesitate!)

Feeling a nauseating sense of discomfort and an immense sense of guilt, Seina still told himself to cut the vine that had wrapped around him, and stabbed his knife into Tarrant's arm.

“Damn it!”

To the stunned Tarrant, the sudden pain felt like being stung by a bee. He reflexively tried to shake it off, striking Seina with the butt of his gun.

“…Damn it!”

By the time Tarrant realized his mistake, Seina had collapsed at Kiriko's feet.

Without a hostage or a Guardian, Tarrant's death was certain. Yet he felt a terrifying thrill at this dread. He had been anticipating the moment Kiriko would turn to him, her murderous intent striking like lightning. But his expectations were spectacularly shattered. Kiriko's eyes, which he had found beautiful, were not directed at him, but at Seina, and those eyes turned to dismay.

“You bastard, right in front of me!” Tarrant, enraged by a humiliation akin to witnessing his lover share intimacy with another man right before his eyes, fired at Seina.

“That’s dangerous!”

Kiriko's suit, acting as a shield for Seina, deflected the energy blast. However, it couldn't withstand the accumulated overload and ceased functioning. Another direct hit would be fatal. Yet Kiriko, still shielding Seina, picked up a small fragment of the bulkhead lying on the floor and hurled it at Tarrant's gun.

The fragment deflected Tarrant's gun, and Kiriko charged straight at him, but her eyes were no longer what Tarrant had hoped, but had now turned to a matter-of-fact expression, simply eliminating a foreign object.

“Damn it!”

“Tarrant-sama!”

“!!”

Bullets streaked past Kiriko as she charged forward. Pirates who had breached the left bulkhead began firing wildly at her. Soon, the sound of the right bulkhead being destroyed echoed. With her suit's functions failing, Kiriko prioritized Seina's safety over capturing Tarrant.

“Shoot! Don't let them escape! I'll kill them! I'll kill them! I'll kill them!”

Tarrant picked up the gun that had been knocked away and began running down the corridor after Kiriko and Seina. But then, Tarrant noticed an emergency call from Daidoros and stopped.

(An emergency from the core block!? What was the bridge doing?)

Accessing the bridge, Tarrant finally noticed the ship's abnormality. Core block alarms often signaled serious trouble. Yet Tarrant still harbored lingering feelings for Kiriko and Seina. However, when he saw the next data, his face turned pale.

“This energy-to-mass ratio!?”

The data transmitted from the core block indicated the approach of an Imperial Ship.

“Withdraw! An Imperial Ship is closing in!” Regaining his composure, Tarrant shouted to his subordinates.

“Damn!”

“Emergency escape tubes are being fired at the designated points. Hurry!”

“What about the others?”

“If they don't make it, they'll die.”

The pirates began running frantically, as if driven by Tarrant's words. Tarrant glared in the direction Kiriko and Seina had fled,

“Listen up! No matter where you run, I'll find you and kill you!” Tarrant screamed, like a wolf howling.

“Captain! Daidoros is breaking off!”

“Dammit! Does he intend to sink the Linamix!? Maximum side shields! Prepare for attack!”

“It's fine! Probably just making a hyperspace jump, right?”

“Huh?”

The moment Captain Raizu looked at Mitoto, the Daidoros began to warp, then jumped into hyperspace with a violent tremor.

“What? What's going on?”

“I don't know…”

But almost immediately, an even more tremendous shockwave than Daidoros' jump earlier slammed into Linamix.

“Damn! So this is the shock of a jump-out!? … I see, that's why Daidoros ran.”

A look of relief spread across Captain Raizu's face as he realized which ship could cause such an impact.

After a few minutes, the shock subsided and Linamix’s monitors returned to normal, revealing Seto's ship, the Mikagami. Seto's ship was usually an object of awe, but this time the bridge operators cheered with joy as they gazed upon it.

“Who would have thought we'd be saved by Jurai's Demon Princess-dono… Oops, Mitoto-sama, please keep this remark confidential.”

Captain Raizu, who had braced for annihilation upon encountering Daidoros, was slightly excited by the relief that the damage had been miraculously minimal.

“That's a relief. Then let's get everyone out of the escape pods.”

Mitoto, visibly relieved, began to dissolve the hardening gel that had filled the evacuation pod, which was used for shock absorption and sealing.

## Chapter Five: Loss and Determination

At the very top of the GP's advanced medical satellite, orbiting the Academy's home planet, was a convalescent facility featuring a beautiful garden. There were many patients and visitors who came from other floors to take a walk, etc., and many people were enjoying a relaxing time at the entrance with the information desk on the first floor and the garden that led to it.

Breaking that tranquility, Amane burst out of the elevator. Her beauty instantly drew the attention of everyone present, but overwhelmed by her tearful expression, not a single person could utter a sound or move a muscle until she vanished up the stairs.

Without hesitation, Amane walked straight to a specific hospital room and entered without knocking.

The room was astonishingly quiet, as if no one were there. Seina leaned against the sofa-like bed, staring blankly out at the garden. Even the usually noisy NB sat by the window, blending into the background like a ball carelessly placed in a child's room.

Amane confirmed there was life in Seina's eyes, exhaled a deep sigh of relief, and plopped down roughly onto the chair beside the bed, as if to assert her presence. But then, she too fell silent, blending into the scene, staring at the same view as Seina without uttering a word.

How long did they sit in silence? The quiet, somewhat empty hospital room had definitely changed atmosphere with Amane's arrival. Like spring sunshine melting snow, Amane's

presence slowly transformed the air in the room into something warm and full of life.

"…… Five people… died on that ship…" Seina began to speak in small spurts, like drops of water dripping from a melting icicle.

"And yet… all I could do was run away… I hated him, but I was scared… I wanted to stop, but my body just kept running…" Seina's frozen emotions began to melt, and his voice gradually began to tremble.

"And even though Kiriko-san saved me… even though I couldn't do anything myself… now I'm scared of Kiriko-san, who saved me…"

Until now, Seina only had to think about how to protect himself by giving up all his possibilities and hope. But this time, he learned the price he would have to force not only himself but others to pay for having his own dream. Seina's fist, resting on his lap, clenched tightly, and a single tear fell onto it.

Amane couldn't bear it any longer. She stood up, sat beside Seina, and wrapped her arms around him from behind, holding his trembling shoulders and hands firmly.

"Are you quitting the GP?"

"…Even so, I… I want to stay here. But…" Seina felt ashamed of his selfishness—wanting to stay here even though he couldn't pay the price for simply being here.

——But that's not something only you should bear——

That's what Amane wanted to say. But while taking that burden off Seina would be easy, considering his situation, it was better for the hurdle of his decision to be as high as possible.

"It's frustrating… so frustrating. I want to be stronger…"

"……"

Amane stared intently at Seina.

It was Kiriko who made Seina want to become stronger, not Amane. But that didn't matter to Amane. Seina's desire, his resolve, was precious to her.

(I see… I like Seina.)

Of course, it was still just liking, not love. But until now, Seina had always been on the other side of Kiriko for Amane. Just a friend of a friend, a student at the Academy—someone with a buffer between them. But now, for Amane, Seina was special.

(Raireza would probably smile wryly if she knew… But)

Amane felt the trembling in Seina's body cease. She could sense strength surging into his frail frame. Amane's own heartbeat echoed that sensation, beginning to race.

“…I… don't want to quit.” Seina said firmly, with strength.

“Good, good! That's my boy!” Amane ruffled Seina's hair a bit roughly, then pulled him close in a gentle, enveloping embrace.

(So this is what Mikami-sama meant by 'heart-pounding'…)

Sharing this moment when Seina made an important decision—that alone was enough to satisfy Amane.

(Jealous, aren't you? Jealous, aren't you, Kiriko!)

Amane felt like dancing right there on the spot. But she suppressed her excitement and said, “…Then, I'll help you.” She whispered softly, as if kissing Seina's ear.

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In the living room of Amane's penthouse, Airi peered into Seina's hospital room via NB. And it wasn't just Airi, Hakuren and the other three, along with Elma, were also teary-eyed as they watched this moving scene.

"Hey ～～～～～～～～Amane! That's not fair, you little bitch! Get out of my way, Kirche! What are you doing?"

But Airi, unlike the other five, was screeching and yelling in a sullen manner. It was just like the scene with Tennyo on the other side of the lake.

“Ugh, you useless lot! Hey, you! That old hag's dog maid and my secretary! What are you just standing there for? Go and get in the way!”

“That's quite embarrassing, Airi-sama.” The five women shot Airi a look of contempt and said in unison.

“It's not something a mature woman should do, to try and spoil such a moving scene.”

“Damn! Why are you criticizing people with such a smug look on your face, Gyokuren? Normally, you wouldn't even be asked to do anything, but you'd step in and send those hospital staff into the hell of lust!”

“Haha. There's no way I could do something so uncouth, Airi-sama.” Gyokuren casually looked away from Airi as she spoke.

Normally, Hakuren and the other two who knew Gyokuren well would have retorted, “Don't lie!”

But ever since the personal incident orchestrated against NB the other day, Gyokuren's attitude toward Seina had become remarkably straightforward. Gyokuren genuinely believed it would be rude to interfere with Amane and Seina. At this point, Airi was completely defeated. And the voice that sealed it came from behind her.

“I agree with everyone else,” Suddenly, it was Mikami who spoke up.

“Gah! Why is she here…? No way!” Airi looked at NB displayed on the monitor.

“I told you to keep quiet about it.”

“No, no. To be fair to her, she hasn't said a word. But sometimes, seeing someone endure in silence tells you more than words ever could, hohoho.”

With surprising agility for her age, Mikami grabbed Airi by the scruff of her neck as she tried to escape. Her grip was incredibly strong, easily overpowering Airi's resistance.

“I deliberately kept quiet out of respect for Minaho-sama and the secretaries, but I do think Airi-sama's recent behavior has been a bit excessive, hehehe.”

“Eh?!” Airi's face turned pale in an instant.

“There are several matters I wish to discuss with you. Let's go to the Chairman's office for now.”

“No, I don't want to! I'll be good, so stop spanking me!”

It was like a mother dragging along a child throwing a tantrum. Everyone stared dumbstruck as Mikami led Airi away, who seemed to be radiating some kind of strange, tragic aura.

“It's a bit pitiful, but… she brought it on herself. Anyway, we should get back to work soon.”

At Hakuren's words, everyone present agreed and returned to their respective tasks.

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“Eighty-six injured, five dead beyond advanced resuscitation… It's amazing that we suffered such minor casualties after encountering Tarrant Shank. It's a blessing in disguise.”

Her butt still stinging from Mikami's slap, Airi sprawled on the sofa in the reception area next to the Chairman's office, reading the report. Regardless of her posture, having been scolded by Mikami and brought back to her senses, Airi's expression was utterly serious.

“Anything hinting at Kiriko-san's infiltration of Daidoros has been removed from the records

and reports. Captain Raizu and the bridge crew also cooperated fully during the inquiry. However, Kiriko-san's extermination of the pirates aboard the Linamix was impossible to conceal, so it has been concluded that it was Airi-sama's prototype equipment."

"Right, thank you. Well, regarding Kiriko-chan's equipment, I did actually assist in its development."

"Frankly, it's regrettable we couldn't sink the Daidoros. But attempting to penetrate its core could have led to the worst possible outcome…"

"The trouble is, many refuse to acknowledge that… Once the truth comes out, those noisy types will start harping on about responsibility for missing the chance to sink Daidoros. Makes me want to tie them all together and toss them onto a ship with Seina-kun, honestly."

"Hohoho. That's a threat worse than making them clean with Mitoto. Thankfully, no fool of a committee member showed their tail at the inquiry meeting. But during individual interrogations, it seems some did pull a little prank."

"Well, that's about the extent of what they're capable of. It's a miracle we encountered Daidoros and suffered almost no damage. On top of that, infiltrating Daidoros… there's no way anyone could imagine that. If they mentioned it, they'd only be suspected of lacking ability or having ties to Tarrant."

"The suspicion of spying within Linamix itself has been cleared, as Mitoto and Seina-kun's patterns of behavior and Kiriko-san's combat records were found to be consistent."

"Ha ha! You admitted it so readily because if you'd kept insisting, it would've exposed your delaying tactics in dispatching the rescue fleet, right?"

"Hohoho. Position-wise, Seto-sama's Mikagami arrived at the scene faster. They were desperate to cover that up. We settled it by agreeing to prioritize speeding up deployment procedures."

"Heh. Well then, let's conduct a surprise inspection at some appropriate time to see if that promise is being properly kept." Airi grinned maliciously, her expression wicked.

"Go easy on me… By the way, what are your thoughts on upper management's request to change the plan?"

"You mean that thing about route setting being the captain's prerogative, so they can't let a crew member like Seina-kun do it? Well, logically that makes sense, but during transport missions, they did use random jump route settings, didn't they?"

"The captain who guided Seina-kun has been given a stern warning and will have his pay docked."

"Only now? Poor guy… Those guys really don't want to run into Tarrant, do they? Or maybe they don't want us to run into him…?"

Even within the GP and the military, there were those who leaked information to pirates and took a cut of the stolen cargo. There were pirates they wanted to capture, and pirates they didn't. Of course, as sources of intelligence, they were a necessary evil too.

“We are currently investigating this matter, including Linamix's personnel directives.”

“Please do something for the captain who got caught in the crossfire.”

“Understood. However, it's also true that the staff are deeply unsettled after learning about the Linamix incident. Even personnel from the decoy division are reportedly saying they'd rather transfer or resign than join Seina-kun's team…”

“Oh dear. But if Seina-kun doesn't designate the route, it'll be half as effective… In that case, why not just make Seina-kun the captain?”

“Don't be ridiculous… Well, it's not a bad idea, but what about the promotion criteria? The required service hours for promotion are non-negotiable.”

“If it's my direct Special Operations Unit, assigning an assistant should solve that. Plus, it gives us an excuse to keep outsiders off the 'Kamidake'. And if I assign Kiriko-chan to be his assistant, the military won't have any complaints either.”

“Still, the GP is a powerful organization rooted in the Seniwa faction. Relying solely on Airi-sama's forceful push risks concentrating criticism on Seina-kun and the others. Given Seina-kun's situation, we need a strategy that minimizes friction. Let's route it through Mitoto's cleaning division.”

“True, that place is powerful enough to be called the Second Intelligence Division, but…”

The cleaning division handled maintenance and inspection management too, entering every conceivable location on GP related facilities and ships for cleaning. Beyond just trash and dust, they removed and decontaminated various high-level radioactive materials and hazardous substances. Cleaning staff whose work extended even to gun barrels and reactor cores were top-tier technical professionals. While cleaning staff didn't directly handle classified information, they possessed extensive and sophisticated knowledge gained from what they saw and heard. Many people also confided in these staff members, who managed daily living arrangements, about various relationship troubles and concerns. Many had been looked after by them since their rookie days. Consequently, no matter how high up they climbed, many crew members still couldn't hold their heads high around older and former cleaning staff.

“…Are you sure? People already think you're biased toward me and Seto-sama.”

“Seina-kun is my student. I'll do what's necessary if it's required. Besides, if she finds out she's been excluded, knowing that girl, she'll whine and complain every night at Airi-sama's bedside, crying her eyes out.”

“Th-that sounds a bit harsh.”

“Hohoho. If we have it signed by Airi-sama, Mitoto, and myself, and limit the experiment period until Seina-kun graduates, there shouldn't be any criticism.”

“With that amount of time, he should be able to meet the official promotion criteria to captain before graduation.”

“And with that much time, the situation should have changed considerably.”

“Heheheh… This is getting interesting. Well then, next is arranging Kiriko-chan and the Kamidake crew.”

Before Airi could finish speaking, Mikami activated the communication monitor.

“…Instructor Masaki Kiriko to the principal's office… Yes, as soon as possible… Please see to it.”

After that brief exchange, Mikami bowed to Airi, who remained sprawled out, then headed for GP Academy via the transfer gate.

Several minutes later, in the GP Academy principal's office, Mikami and Kiriko sat facing each other on the sofa. Kiriko looked even more exhausted than Seina had at the hospital. Of course, her physical injuries were fully healed within an hour. But what was even more serious were the scars on her heart.

(Seina-chan saw me…)

Her blood-spattered form—while unavoidable in that situation, she had shown this side of herself to the one person she never wanted to see it. Of course, if Seina was in the GP, he would eventually face life-or-death situations. But she had hoped that would be a place reached only after gaining the necessary experience and progressing through the proper stages.

“Haa…” How many times had she sighed by now? With each sigh, Kiriko slumped like a deflating balloon.

(Hohohoh)

Mikami watched her with affection. It would be easy to pump air back into that deflated balloon. But she wanted to savor that adorable sight just a little longer.

—A fine girl has joined us. Like a supple young bamboo shoot.

A few years ago, Seto had said to Mikami with rare cheerfulness. Kiriko had first met her a year later, after Kiriko had undergone about ten years of education and training in a special accelerated space.

—She resembles Funaho-sama in her youth.

That was Mikami's first impression. Of course, she knew Kiriko was from the Masaki family's Imperial Family, and she'd heard some things from Airi and Minaho. But Kiriko resembled Funaho more than anyone she'd ever met.

(Seto-sama must have been thrilled.)

Funaho was Jurai's anchor. She wasn't particularly conspicuous, but without her, everything would fall apart. She was as important as the extraordinary talents of Seto or Washu… no, even more so.

(Well, I suppose it's time to stop being so mean.)

Mikami placed a transfer order plate before Kiriko.

"…A transfer?"

"Yes. There was a recommendation specifically requesting you."

"…Well, maybe putting some distance between us wouldn't be such a bad idea…"

Mikami struggled to stifle a laugh at Kiriko's words.

"Take a good look at the details."

"Huh? ……Assigned ship, Kamidake! The captain is Seina-chan!?"

Kiriko looked at Mikami with an expression bordering on panic. The reason for this was not the name of Jurai's next flagship, Kamidake, or the captain's title. It was the name Seina itself.

"B-but, Mikami-sama… um…"

"Seina-kun has started walking! What are you going to do?"

"Huh? I… I…"

"With this assignment, even if it's just on paper, Seina-kun becomes your superior. Plus, Seina-kun already has accumulated strength. If you're not careful, you'll be left behind."

Mikami's stern words made Kiriko's hands tremble. But it was a tremor of joy, a vibrant pulse of life. Saturated to the brink, it needed just one more push to explode and start running.

"Oh, I forgot to mention. It's been decided that besides you, Amane Kaunaq-sensei will also be assisting Seina-kun. Additionally, Hakuren-san, Karen-san, Suiren-san, and Gyokuren-san will be assigned as crew members… What do you think?" Mikami smiled, looking thoroughly delighted.

This blatant assignment, information disclosure, and steering were standard tactics for Seto or Airi. Of course, their methods were far more subtle and ruthless. But Mikami's approach

was straightforward, filled with both sternness and kindness.

Thud! Kiriko slammed her hands down on the desk.

“I accept the assignment!” She declared.

“Very well.”

Mikami's words prompted both women to break into broad smiles.

“Thank you, Mikami-sama.” Kiriko's expression was like the spring sun itself.

When Hakuren and the others reported that Seina's ship had been attacked by Tarrant, the one most shaken was Elma.

“Seina-sama's injuries have already been fully treated. He's currently recuperating aboard the advanced medical satellite orbiting the Academy's homeworld.”

“Alright, let's go right away! Hey, Elma?”

Amane shook Elma's shoulder, who was still in a daze.

“Huh?”

“We're going to see Seina.”

“I… I… I don't have the qualifications…”

“What are you talking about? Are you okay?”

“Ahh, I'm sorry. I was just startled… But suddenly showing up in a large group would be an imposition, so I'll go to Airi-sama's place instead.”

“Then we'll wait here. Please let us know if anything happens.”

“Got it… Alright, I'm off!” Amane grabbed the coat hanging on the sofa and dashed out of the living room.

Replacing her, Airi arrived, and the relay conference proceeded via NB.

After Mikami barged in and Airi was taken away, Elma sat in her private room aboard the ship housing the Chairman's office, looking dazed and unable to focus on her work. Just then, the communication monitor activated,

“Elma, you there? Got time? Come over here!”

As usual, Airi cut the connection without waiting for a reply.

“I can't just sit here in a daze forever.”

As if pushed by Airi's excitement, Elma stood up and headed towards Airi, but when she casually opened the door, Airi was standing right in front of her.

“AAAAAAAAAH!”

“Stop screaming! Let's go!”

Airi grabbed Elma's hand as she tried to jump back and started pulling her along.

“Aaaaaah! W-where are we going?! Don't pull so hard!”

“I'll show you something cool!”

Airi headed to the small boat landing area at the bottom of the ship, roughly threw Elma into a two-seater spacecraft about the size of a compact car, and jumped into the driver's seat herself.

“Ow ow ow… Stop being so reckless!”

“We're in a hurry. My butt still hurts too, so just tough it out a little.” Spouting some incomprehensible logic, Airi roughly launched the spacecraft.

“You're in an awful hurry… Where are we going?”

“More importantly, Elma. Are you really not going to board Seina-kun's ship?”

“Huh? But… I have work to do here.”

“Amane-chan and Kiriko-chan decided to go aboard, but if you're the only one not joining, that's no fun, is it?”

“If Amane-san and Kiriko-san are going, I don't think it's necessary, do you?”

“But Hakuren-chan and the others are boarding too?”

“Is that an order?”

“No, it's not.”

“Then I'll have to decline this time. Of course, I'll assist with other backup tasks… But more importantly, where are we going now?”

“My primary workshop.”

“Whaaaaat!?”

The Philosopher's First Workshop was the headquarters where only the most crucial research was conducted, directly overseen by the Philosopher herself. It was a place more vital than the core of a nation, highly classified, so even Airi's high-ranking secretary rarely entered it.

“Come on, we're almost there.”

At that moment, the Academy's home planet visible to the right warped and vanished. The next instant, the view returned to normal. But before them now was a space station resembling a beehive, which hadn't been there moments before.

“Is that it? It seems a bit small for that, though.”

It was only about one kilometer long. A Philosophers' research spanned diverse fields and required immense space. There was no way that her headquarters could possibly be just one kilometer long.

The small craft carrying the two of them entered one of the honeycomb-like openings.

“This is just a gate. Come on, follow me.”

After disembarking, the two began walking, guided by Airi. What appeared to be an ordinary, unremarkable passageway was actually a dense cluster of countless checkpoints and transfer gates. Within just fifty meters of corridor, hundreds of transfers repeated, and only those who passed through the checks could reach the transfer gate at the end, leading to their intended destination.

“This is…”

The sense of unease Elma felt upon passing through the gate at the end was the same one experienced during ultra-long-distance transfers. And what appeared before Elma once the transfer ended was a small dock for assembling ultra-precise machinery and a single small ship.

“What is this?”

“It's the ship Seina-kun and the others will be on.”

“The ship Seina-san will be on… is it being built in Airi-sama's First Workshop!?”

Airi didn't answer Elma's question, instead descending the stairs directly ahead. Below lay an open-air mobile operations room—a ceilingless, disc-like space.

“We've been waiting for you, Airi-sama.”

A female operator noticed Airi and hurried over.

“Tennyo…sama?”

Elma recognized the woman's face. She was the woman who had been with Seina at the lakeside pavilion after Miki's incident.

“Heh. I believe this is our first meeting, Elma-san… Oh, so you were peeking with Seto-sama and the others back then too?”

“Eh?! Ah… um… I'm so sorry!” Elma blushed bright red and bowed her head.

“It's fine. You were worried about Seina-chan, after all. Besides, I wouldn't be rude to someone who came to help us.”

“…Help?”

“This ship's delivery suddenly got moved up. Everyone's been pulling all-nighters doing final checks and is completely exhausted. So I asked Airi-sama for reinforcements, but…”

“Huh!?” Elma looked at Airi's face, drawn by Tennyo.

“Hohoho! I know you said you wouldn't be able to board the ship, but you'd provide backup for everything else, right? I told you! I told you!”

“Aye aye. Right then, let's get moving.”

Airi and Tennyo simultaneously grabbed the stunned Elma's arms and led her toward an operator's seat.

“There you go! Help has arrived, so you can get some rest!”

As Tennyo said this, Hakuryo, who had been sitting in the seat, swayed weakly to his feet and, “P-please… help me.” With a ghostly expression, he said this before being sucked into the hole that opened in the floor.

“Alright, we'll focus on the GP equipment now. Let's get to it.”

Tennyo and Airi seated Elma in the spot Hakuryo had occupied moments before, then took the chairs on either side. Most of the checks were done by computer, so the work itself wasn't constantly busy. It involved checking the operation of basic equipment, automatic responses and maintenance during troubles, and verifying those procedures according to the situation. That said, it was also a dull, lengthy task, repeating each process tens of thousands of times. Elma began checking the work procedures as if steeled for the task.

“What?!… This ship… what the hell is this…?”

Elma stared dumbstruck at the displayed specifications. It possessed capabilities rivaling a GP flagship-class battleship, despite being only one-tenth its size. Of course, considering the existence of the “Imperial Ship”—an unclassifiable monstrosity—and its construction in a Philosopher's First Workshop, its capabilities weren't entirely surprising. What was astonishing was that it was built with mass production in mind. Based on estimated maintenance costs, one GP main battle cruiser equaled the cost of five of these ships.

“This ship was developed as Jurai's next flagship battleship. Its code name is 'Kamidake'.”

“Jurai's!? But why give it to Seina-san?” Of course, she asked that question with the intention of getting her to reveal such top-secret information.

“Is it really that strange? He’s encountered Komachi Kyō, Tarrant Shank… and oh yeah,

Ryoko Balta too.”

“That's…”

“He keeps encountering such a distinguished group of people. Preparing a ship worthy of them is only natural, isn't it?”

“Well… maybe. But still, deploying Jurai's next flagship instead of the Academy's…”

“Jurai and Seto-sama have witnessed Seina-kun's power firsthand. And it's to Jurai's advantage. Seina-chan's bad luck attracts all sorts of trouble, making him perfect for testing new, versatile ships.”

“I see… You might be right about that.”

“Then there's the publicity angle, I suppose? A major power like Jurai has to be quite careful about deploying new military assets. It could fuel potential wariness from other nations, you know.”

“So we just leak some info to get them used to it?”

“…Using that as an excuse, but really, that old hag is just enjoying herself! Anyway, you're getting interested in this ship, aren't you? Want to come aboard?” Airi, who had been silent until then, said gleefully.

“Eh… but…”

Tennyo nudged the confused Elma.

“You shouldn't take it too seriously. It's just a bet between us and Seto-sama's group about who'll end up with Seina-chan.”

“Huh!? W-what? Me too?”

“Ahh! You spilled the beans, Tennyo-chan!”

“Your motives for trying to get me involved are impure. Of course, personally, I'd be thrilled if lots of people like Elma-san were around Seina-chan.”

“You're trying to impress everyone, that's unfair!”

“Ahahaha! How do you expect to cover it up now, after everyone's seen the real Airi-sama?”

“You little brat! You've been getting a bit too cocky lately!”

Airi and Tennyo were arguing, but their movements were just as swift as their arguments.

“Heh… You two are quite alike, aren't you?”

“Well, we are grandmother and granddaughter, after all.”

“Don't call me grandma!” Airi suddenly stopped what she was doing, stood up, and yelled.

It seemed to be a topic she really didn't want to touch on.

“Yes, yes. But please do your work properly, Airi-sama. This ship is meant to protect the life of my precious younger brother, after all.”

“Brother? You mean Seina-san?”

“If you swapped places with Kiyone and took care of him, then he's your son! Your son!”

“Then Airi-sama is his great-grandmother, right?”

“G-gross! ……No way. I'm not his great-grandmother!”

Having dug herself into a hole, Airi threw herself into her work as if to escape. Seeing this, Tennyo gave a satisfied V sign.

“I win.”

“Your two seem to be very different from Minaho-sama.”

“Hmm? Well, Aunt Minaho is especially strict because she's Seto-sama's subordinate. Plus, there's the difference in our positions—she's a Juraian executive, and I'm an Academy executive.”

Taking that conversation as a natural break, the three concentrated on their work for a while. Elma, drawing on her experience as Airi's secretary, was well-accustomed to this sort of task. The three worked rhythmically on the keyboards, like a piano competition.

“It has fewer weapons than I expected… though each one is incredibly powerful, of course.” Elma said, not directing it specifically at either Airi or Tennyo, once the work settled into a rhythm and they gained some breathing room.

As if following a script, the two began answering in perfect, measured turns.

“It's primarily a decoy ship, after all. While it can immobilize enemies with its high maneuverability and accuracy, protecting the crew takes priority over combat capabilities.”

“I see…”

“And while Seina-chan's abilities are truly remarkable, we still don't know how effective they'll be over the long term. The pirates will surely devise countermeasures. If we were just talking about ship performance, we could build even more powerful vessels. But for Seina-chan, high reliability is crucial. That's why we're using mass-produced ships.”

“But the main computer is a bit unusual. How should I put it…”

“Doesn't seem very efficient?”

“Huh!? Well, to put it plainly… It's like it gives an interesting reaction, or rather…” Elma

hesitated to describe Kamidake's main computer's response in concrete terms. She couldn't clearly explain what exactly was off, but the response felt strange.

“…Almost childlike.”

“Yes, that's it! Exactly! And somehow… more animal-like…”

“Ahahahaha! Exactly! Isn't it adorable? The hull is mass-produced, but the main computer is a prototype. It's modeled after the Royal Trees.”

“Royal Trees!? Is this what the Imperial Ship's computer is like?”

“Royal Trees aren't computers. They possesses a proper personality… no, it's a god-like existence surpassing humans, a higher dimensional lifeform.”

“Higher dimensional… lifeform. I've heard rumors, but really?”

“Yes, though it doesn't possess the Imperial Ship's power, of course. There are many uncertain factors, but Airi-sama thought this might suit Seina-chan and the crew better, you see.”

“But the Imperial Ship is top-secret, right? How can we study it?”

“We can. If we become friends.”

“Friends? They're higher dimensional beings! They're practically gods!”

“True. I used to think the same way. Before I met Yosho-kun, that is.”

“Speaking of Yosho-sama, he's the missing eldest son of the current Juraian Emperor, right? Well, I've heard from my seniors that there are all sorts of complicated circumstances surrounding that… Anyway, I did get to see all the relevant documents…”

“So you know, then. That I'm from Airai.”

“Yes.”

“I'll skip the details, but I wanted a clear deity for the hollowed-out Airai. Frankly, I thought if I could ask Tsunami-sama, the progenitor tree of the Royal Trees, maybe I could get one of the three Goddesses… So, I took on the role of guide for that guy… Yosho-kun, who was studying abroad at the Academy at the time, full of ulterior motives.”

“I-Is that okay? …Telling me something like that?” Elma responded with a look of confusion to Airi, who was happily recounting a story that would fetch a fortune if sold to a gossip magazine.

But Airi continued in a carefree tone. “It's fine, it's fine! Anyway, after all that, I managed to meet his 'Funaho' chan… Can you believe it? He named his ship after his mother. Total mama's boy!”

“Airi-sama, you're getting off topic! Anyway, Grandpa… no, Yosho-sama naming his ship after Funaho-sama…”

“I know that! It was because he wanted to acknowledge Funaho-sama, who was treated like an outcast back then. But it doesn't change the fact he's a mama's boy!”

“That mama's boy, who went and spun some embarrassingly cheesy love story. And who was it that got an underage girl pregnant with Aunt Minaho, causing Airai's isolation?”

“Ahahahaha! It was me, me! Galaxy Academy Chairperson and Doctor of Philosophy, Masaki Airi! Got a problem with that?”

Airi's credentials were practically invincible. Like the seal of authority from the TV drama “Komon of Mito.” When she brandished that and stood her ground, there was nothing to say. But… **(TN: See the explanation of “Komon of Mito” in GXP 2, pg 78. An inro (seal of authority) was used to show the villians that they were in the presence of the Shogun.)**

“Weren't we talking about Royal Trees?” Tennyo easily sidestepped the defiant Airi.

“Oh, right… Well, meeting that guy's ship was a shock. Cute, cute, cute, cute, cute, cute, cute! It was so cute it was almost unforgivable.”

“Huh… Cute?”

“You might not believe it, but those kids… they hate fighting.”

“Huh? The Imperial Ship, said to be the strongest in the galaxy?”

“Couldn't you say the same about Seina-kun?”

“Huh?”

“Look at the incident Seina-kun got caught up in objectively. Hundreds of pirates, hundreds of criminals, Widow, Tarrant… What do you think others think of that kid?”

“So… Royal Trees are like that too?”

“If the Royal Trees were just computers, Jurai could conquer not just the galaxy, but the entire universe. But those kids don't want that, and the ship's owners wouldn't force it on them either.”

“So if an Imperial Ship got serious, they could wipe out the pirates?”

“If they were willing to annihilate the galaxy and everyone in it.”

“That's absurd!”

“That's what an Imperial Ship is. Its primary role is deterrence. But Seina-kun is different… He attracts pirates without destroying the galaxy…”

“!!”

That meant Seina could become a greater threat to pirates than the Imperial Ship itself. Realizing this, Elma's expression changed drastically.

“Seina-chan being in space means exactly that.”

“……So that's why Kiriko-san tried to take Seina-san back to Earth… she was worried about this… And yet I, irresponsibly…”

“There's no point in thinking negatively. If you mean having a lot of enemies, then that old hag is a real threat. I've thought to myself so many times that I want to kill her in one fell swoop…” Unpleasant memories must have resurfaced, for Airi began muttering to herself, her hands trembling.

“Well, including Airi-sama, some people just got what they deserved. But even so, they had the power to protect themselves and the time to do it. Seina-chan doesn't have that… I want you to think about that.”

“Yeah… I guess you're right.”

“I'm sorry. In the end, it seemed like I was forcing you to do something. But for my cute little brother, I'll do anything.”

“For your cute little brother?”

The image of Seina and Tennyo by that lake flashed back into Elma's mind.

“Yes. If that child will laugh from the bottom of his heart, I'll do anything.” Tennyo's smile was truly gentle and sorrowful.

(…Ah!) Elma felt as if her heart had been torn out by that smile. It reminded her of the time after learning about Miki's incident, when she had took Seina back to the dorm.

(Back then, I… Seina-kun seemed like a puppet, moving around while missing something big inside him.)

—Seina, who wasn't even allowed hope, who was trying to suppress even his desires.

—Seina, who had to pay an enormous price even for the simple wish to stay in the GP.

—Seina, who resolved to steadily fill the gaping hole of misfortune within himself, too vast for any one person to fill.

(I want to fill that sad void… with something joyful!) Elma felt a desire akin to intense thirst.

A week had passed since then, and Seina, hospitalized, was living truly peaceful days.

He had found his goal and gained mental stability by pouring out all his inner turmoil to Amane. Plus, since Amane had only visited once and there were no other noisy visitors, the

environment was calm too. The only thing troubling him was Kiriko. Communication between parties involved in an ongoing investigation was prohibited, so all external contact was cut off. Not only could he not speak to Kiriko, he had no way of knowing Kiriko's situation at all.

“There's no point in rushing things. …Honestly, even if I saw Kiriko-san now, I wouldn't know what to say or how to say it… Hm?” He felt a slight, twitching discomfort in the hand gripping the blanket.

“…Still, it's incredible, isn't it?”

Seina rolled up his hostpital gown and looked at his arms and legs, where no scars were visible at all. Based on his experience, burns and wounds with holes like those would normally take at least three months to heal enough for normal movement. Yet in just one week, they had healed to the point where he only felt a slight discomfort.

“The wounds themselves heal in just a few hours, so it really is incredible… But…”

Seina had several repair patch stickers on places completely different from where Tarrant had injured him. These were for treating wounds he'd gotten during his hospitalization, thanks to that infamous streak of bad luck. Perhaps baffled or simply fed up with the sheer frequency and Seina's skill at self-diagnosis and first aid, the doctors and nurses had started keeping a stack of repair stickers in his room.

“Take care of the rest yourself,” they had said.

“Guess I ended up being a bother to the doctors and nurses after all,” But it wasn't all bad. It turned out to be a good opportunity to learn about hazardous areas and points of caution within the hospital facilities that had previously gone unnoticed. The facility management staff expressed deep gratitude and gave him many gifts.

That day, after his final medical checkup and lunch in the large cafeteria, Seina changed out of the clothes he'd worn in the hospital and into his GP Academy uniform. As he finished changing and felt the familiar fabric of his uniform for the first time in a while, the call signaling a visitor sounded.

“Come in.”

Simultaneously with Seina's voice, the sound of the door opening was heard, and Mikami appeared from behind the partition.

“Principal Mikami!”

Seina stood at attention and saluted. Mikami nodded with satisfaction at his crisp movements and determined gaze.

“You look well. I'm relieved to hear your medical check results were favorable.”

“I'm truly sorry for all the trouble I caused.”

“The fault was mine. Mitoto dragged you into this mess, I'm sorry.”

“I'm probably the one who attracted the pirates… and this is the result…”

“Regretting it won't accomplish anything. What matters more is how you apply that experience going forward. You should know that better than anyone.”

“Yes.”

“Very well. Yamada Seina-kun. You have been cleared for discharge at this time. Therefore, I order you to immediately proceed to your next assignment location. Detailed information has been forwarded to NB; follow their instructions.”

“Right away? …Um…”

Seina wanted to go to Amane's penthouse first, to check on Kiriko.

“That's how work is. We'll handle the follow-up procedures here. You are to proceed to the location immediately.”

“Understood! I'll go to the mission site immediately!” Seina stood at attention once more and saluted as he spoke.

“Very well. Do your best.”

Turning his back on Mikami, who smiled warmly, Seina picked up NB and left the hospital room.

After greeting the attending physician and the nurses he had gotten to know, Seina followed NB's lead, heading first to the transfer gate inside the medical satellite. Glancing sideways at the fixed-position gate bustling with people coming and going, he made his way toward the transfer gate where he could specify his destination.

“Hm?”

In a deserted corridor, NB looked up at Seina curiously as he suddenly stopped.

“Master, are you worried about Kiriko-han?” NB asked Seina, who had stopped and fallen silent, with a look of concern.

“Of course I'm concerned…” Seina's expression softened slightly into a smile as he gazed out the window at the universe beyond and the beautifully shining Academy homeworld.

“…I was just remembering the first time I went into space.”

“You mean when you came to the Academy from Earth?”

“Can you believe it? On Earth, only a handful of people can actually see a view like this, and it costs an absolute fortune.”

“But here, it's just an everyday sight.”

“…One day, Amane-san gave me a pamphlet. I filled it out half-jokingly, and when I woke up, I was on a GP transport ship. Mitoto-san was rubbing my head… Back then, just like now, I couldn't get in touch with Kiriko-san …”

“I see. You're right, there are a lot of parallels. This time too, Amane-san came to visit, Master decided to stay with the GP, and though it wasn't Mitoto-san, Principal Kuramitsu Mikami came… Come to think of it, you reunited with Kiriko-san during the Academy's immigration screening.”

“Yeah.”

“Then we'll see her again soon, right?”

Seina looked at NB strangely as he said that.

“…Still, you seem way more normal now… I was worried you might do something weird to the nurse…”

“Well, I'm having trouble too. A bunch of weird programs have been installed… You weren't seriously going to reset me, were you?“

“If it was really bad, I might have considered it… But I didn't want to mess with you and make things worse. The way you are now is fine.”

“How about changing the language settings? I can transform into a woman to your liking. If she's a good woman, she might overlook a little mischief.”

“I'm just too used to this now… Plus, doing something like that would probably lead to all kinds of misunderstandings.”

This would be especially true if there was a famous erotic actress who was famous in various ways and who used the material that made up NB.

“True, suddenly getting hit with a core-shattering punch would be dangerous… But if you ever feel like it, just say the word. There are all sorts of interesting features too.”

“Yeah, you're right…” With a wry smile, Seina gazed out the window again.

“……Are you hesitating?”

“I'm checking… if I have the resolve for it.”

“This place, you see, is called the 'Lost Passage'.”

“The Lost Passage?”

“This hospital is for advanced treatment. Only people like you, who've suffered severe physical and mental injuries, get brought here… That's why, when they're discharged and head back to their duty stations, they get lost here.”

“Could it be… Mikami-sama ordered us to use this place?”

It was meant to give Seina one final choice.

“…Well, yeah. There's still plenty of time before we reach the other side. Think it over until you're satisfied. After what you’ve been through, no one would blame you for running away.”

“I have no intention of running away.”

“Huh?”

“I like it here. But if I'm not here, I think the chances of someone getting dragged into this and getting hurt would drop significantly. So what I'm checking is whether I have the resolve to push through with this selfish desire to stay here.”

Most people agonized over this passageway for their own safety, for self-preservation. But getting hurt himself wasn't part of Seina's worries.

“You're such a difficult person.”

“Hah, yeah, I guess so.” Seina looked outside again and clenched his fist tightly.

“Let's go, NB!” Seina said, looking straight towards the gate.

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Beyond the transfer gate lay a windowless corridor guarded by multiple layers of heavy security. There was no sign indicating where this place was, nor even a plaque to suggest its purpose.

“Pretty heavy security, huh?” NB muttered wearily as he unlocked the tenth door. “Not just the doors, but the corridor has a crazy number of sensors and transfer gates set up too.”

“Transfer gates? Not the kind you see in hospitals?”

“About eighty foreign object exclusion gates were installed in the passageway. Well, humans can't detect them, though.”

“Foreign object exclusion?”

“To eliminate explosives and nanomachines. That alone tells you how highly classified the place we're heading to is.”

“What are we even going there to do?”

“The only data transferred to me was the route to our destination. I guess we’ll just have to go and see.”

Beep! With the sound of the lock disengaging, the door opened to reveal a vast space beyond.

“Oh! Looks like that was the final gate after all.”

Stepping through the door revealed a small-scale ship dock. Where a vessel would normally be moored in the center, a cubic container roughly a hundred meters on each side stood.

“Whoa… What is this?”

It was clearly different from a normal container—pure white and seamless. It resembled a towering wall, giving off an incredibly jarring sense of dissonance.

“It's a high-security sealed container… Used for transporting fragile large precision parts or special custom items. Probably…”

“Oh, there are people over there. Should we ask them?”

Seina spotted three figures near the container.

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“Hey Alan, maybe we should just call it quits?”

“After all, it's the same ship that Yamada Seina will be on.”

“What are you talking about? We've got nowhere else to go!”

Looking up at the container and talking were Alan, Barry, and Cohen.

“But hey, he even ran into Tarrant.”

“That's exactly why! Listen up! There's no problem with the pay or other conditions… Hell, you could even call it exceptional. You wanna work in some other department, whining about a measly salary? Plus, if you get fired from the GP, the debt collectors will come after you even harder than they are now.”

“Yeah, that's true. But… it's better than dying, right?”

“Hey, hey. You wanna live hand-to-mouth with massive debt? You wanna relive those days, running scared from the fan club guys?”

“Well… I don't want that, but…”

“Think about it. He encountered Death God Tarrant, who is said to wipe out anyone he meets, and almost everyone came back alive. His terrifying legend is history now. The myth is shattered!”

“But that was because it was a military battleship, right?”

“You know this ship's specs, right? Rumor has it, it's an anti-Daidoros destroyer.”

“Really?”

“Alan's right—it's definitely not an ordinary ship.”

“And didn't we talk about this before? What if we encounter Ryoko-sama, or pirates who could become new idols?”

“What would happen…? We'd start a new fan club…”

“That's it! If that happened, we could pay off our debts in no time. Once the debts are gone, we wouldn't have to keep doing this dangerous job forever, right?”

“Right! If we could escape before encountering dangerous pirates…”

“Back to those glorious days of living it up!”

“Wait, wait. Let's play it smart this time. Greed is dangerous.”

“Heh heh heh heh. Oh, speak of the devil! Who's walking this way but Yamada Seina-kun himself?”

Alan and the others spun around to face Seina.

“Oh! If it isn't Yamada's Seina-kun!” He declared, puffing himself up.

“Ah, Alan-san! Long time no see.” Seina straightened up and saluted crisply.

“Hmm, hmm. Your salute's starting to look the part now, isn't it? But listen carefully, Seina-kun, hear me out.”

“Yes.”

“When I first brought you here, you were indeed a guest. Because you were a guest, I treated you with care and couldn't very well make you do chores.”

“But this time is different. You're the lowest-ranking one, so you'll be washing our underwear too.”

“And of course, when Ryoko-san arrives, we go first in the conversation. Got it?”

Following Alan, Barry and Cohen also started speaking arrogantly.

“…Yeah, I guess…… But why Ryoko-san?”

“An officer's orders are absolute! Questioning them is not permitted.”

“Understood.”

Just as Seina saluted, a loud cough echoed through the room.

“Ahem, looks like you're all lined up.”

“What is it? We're teaching the new recruit the basics right now… Haaah!!”

Alan looked toward the voice and recognized former GP Chief Kuramitsu Minami. He turned pale and snapped to attention.

“Long time no see!”

Seina turned toward Minami and saluted.

“Glad to see you're doing well. Mitoto must have caused you quite a bit of trouble.”

“No, I'm the one who should apologize for dragging Mitoto-san into this.”

“Anyway, I'm just glad you're safe. But I never imagined we'd meet again like this, so soon.”

“The practical training isn't for another six months or so.”

“Hm? Ah, right, that's how it is. Well, it seems boarding preparations are nearly complete.” Minami looked up at the container.

Suddenly, a small hole appeared in the side wall of the container, and Hakuren and the others descended on a moving platform.

“Ooooooooooh!”

Alan and the others, who had been frozen in place, let out a murmur of excitement upon seeing the beautiful Hakuren and her companions. Seina, however, who had experienced something similar once before in the dormitory, accepted this reunion without much surprise.

“Welcome. We've been waiting for you.”

Hakuren and her team, dressed in the GP Cleaning Department's ceremonial uniforms, saluted with crisp, sharp movements.

“Thanks you for welcoming us!”

Alan and the others practically shoved Seina aside as they rushed forward to greet Hakuren’s team, staring at the four of them as if trying to devour them with their eyes. Alan and the others were particularly transfixed by Gyokuren, whose beauty was beyond compare, staring at her as if their souls had been sucked out, completely dumbfounded.

“… M-m-m-m-m, my luck has suddenly turned around!”

“Welcome. You three, please board from that platform over there.” Hakuren said this with a reproachful look directed at Alan and the others as she stepped in front of Gyokuren to block their leering gazes.

“Seina-sama, please come this way.” Karen and Suiren circled around the bewildered Alan and his companions, grabbed Seina's arms from behind, and pulled him toward the plate

they had arrived on.

“…Wh-why is Seina going over there? That guy's lower rank than us!”

“Yeah, yeah, that's right!”

As Alan and the others voiced their complaints, Minami cleared his throat loudly and declared, “An officer's orders are absolute. Questioning them is not permitted.” Minami mimicked the tone Alan had used earlier when speaking to Seina.

“Take a look at their rank insignia.”

“Huh? …… AAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

At Minami's prompting, Alan and the others looked at Hakuren's rank insignia and jumped back, snapping to attention and saluting. Their ranks were far above Alan's group—those of senior technical officers.

“S-Sorry for the disrespect!”

“Then please begin boarding.”

Hearing Hakuren's words, Alan’s group turned and fled towards the plate that had landed on the other side.

“Then, Minami-sama, we’ll take our leave.”

Hakuren and Gyokuren saluted Minami and walked towards Seina, who was being held in Karen and Suiren's arms.

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“Who'd have thought an opportunity would come rolling in this quickly?” Alan murmured happily as he headed toward the boarding platform.

“Chance?”

“Didn't you see them? Each one has what it takes to be an idol… no, one of them is a chillingly beautiful woman on par with Amane Kaunaq! We don't even need to discover new idol pirates!”

“Right! If we start a fan club for them…”

“We'd be rolling in it!”

Alan and his team danced with wild excitement, leaping onto the transport plate.

The transport plate carrying Seina and the girls entered through an opening that could only be described as a gaping hole. In a way, it was fitting to describe it as ultra-futuristic science; the entrance closed smoothly, blending seamlessly with the wall.

“Seina-sama, this is your ship, ‘Kamidake’.”

Hakuren pointed to a ship fixed in place, shaped like a cone cut vertically in half. It resembled a toy spaceship in a styrofoam case—that description fit it perfectly.

“Why is it stored in a container like this?”

“Kamidake is a pre-production prototype that was only just completed. I can't explain the details myself, but the designer and creator of this ship is Airi-sama.”

“Huh?” Seina reflexively looked toward NB.

“What's with that look?”

“Ah, no… I just… got a little worried.”

“Well then, should I pull the plug and transform into a hot chick?”

Hakuren and the others watched Seina and NB, struggling to stifle their laughter.

“Heh… Seina-sama, at least it's high-performance, you see. And the crew are all excellent, so rest assured.” Hakuren said, trying to stop Seina and NB's argument.

“Y-Yeah, you're right.”

“Hey Hakuren-san, Gyokuren-san, Karen-san, Suiren-san, whatever! Lend me your Personal Data! As long as I don't put in the character data, it should be fine, right? I wanna show you just how good I am!”

“Alright, alright! My bad!”

Seina pried NB off Hakuren and the others. At the same time, the transport plate entered the Kamidake.

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Led into a room that felt like a luxury hotel suite, Seina changed into the uniform Hakuren had instructed him to wear in a closet that seemed at least six tatami mats in size. Hakuren and the others entered as if waiting for him, and began tidying up Seina's appearance.

“Um… by the way, what am I supposed to do on this ship?”

“This way, please.” Hakuren didn’t answer, leading Seina to a desk at the back of the room.

“Please sit here. And don't move your body.”

“Y-yes.”

Seina sat down on the chair, looking puzzled. A shield enveloped the entire area, including Seina, and the chair was sucked into a hole that opened in the floor.

“Huh?!”

After traveling through a dimly lit tube for a few seconds, Seina was suddenly enveloped in bright light and arrived on Kamidake's bridge.

“W-Where am I?” Seina looked around and made eye contact with Alan and the other two, who were saluting below and in front of him.

“……Seina! What the hell are you doing coming out of there?! That's the captain's chair!”

“Seriously, I was waiting nervously, and it's you!”

“Seriously, don't scare us like that!”

Alan and the others said in unison.

“Come on, I'll pretend I didn't see anything. Just get down here already. Come on, come on.” Alan propped one elbow on the console and beckoned.

“This is no mistake,” at that moment, the seats occupied by Hakuren and Suiren at both ends of the five-seat operator console in front rose up.

“!!”

Alan’s team stood erect and saluted Hakuren’s team.

“Yamada Seina-sama has been appointed captain of the Kamidake as of this date.” Hakuren said and saluted Seina along with Suiren.

“Whaaaaaaat!?” Alan’s group, as well as Seina, simultaneously exclaimed in surprise.

“Oh, really, Alan, that rank insignia belongs to the captain.”

“We're the lowest of the low here?”

Alan's face fell as Barry and Cohen became upset, “…Salute the Captain!” He saluted alongside Barry and Cohen.

“R-right.”

Seina reflexively returned the salute, still dumbfounded, unable to grasp the situation.

“Come on, pull yourself together!”

From the box seat diagonally behind and to the side of the captain's chair where Seina stood, a seat carrying Amane rose up.

“…Ah, Amane-sensei!?”

“I'm not your teacher anymore, Captain.” Amane saluted Seina, flashed a bright smile, and winked. “Well, I suppose it's hard to feel it all at once when you're told so suddenly. Though I suppose that's exactly the reaction Airi-sama and Mikami-sama were hoping for when they kept quiet about it.”

“Me, the captain… That's way too sudden, no matter how you look at it!”

“I'll explain the details later. But this suddenness is just par for the course, right?”

“Well…”

——That's just how work is.

At that moment, Seina recalled Mikami's words in the hospital room.

“Still, our positions reversed in the blink of an eye. Me… and her too.” Saying that, Amane looked past Seina toward the box on the opposite side.

“…Her?” Seina turned around, drawn by the question, and saw Kiriko rising up from the floor.

“Kiriko-san!”

At this sudden reunion, Seina nervously looked at Kiriko's face. Of course, Kiriko felt the same way, her expression tense too.

The people around them patiently waited as the two stared at each other. Of course, Alan and his team, unaware of the situation, had been quietly ordered by Hakuren and Suiren to stand by at the operator seats.

“It's… kind of like back then, isn't it?”

“…Yeah.”

This referred to what Seina had just told NB in the ‘Lost Passage’ – their reunion at the immigration office. Not only Seina, but Kiriko too had recalled that moment. Triggered by that conversation, both of them smiled without prompting, easing the tension in the air.

Then, Kiriko stood up with a sharp expression and declared, “I am Masaki Kiriko, newly assigned as Information Management Officer. Pleased to meet you, Captain Yamada Seina!” She saluted Seina.

“Nice to meet you.” Seina returned the salute, a little stiffly.

“Hey, you two! How long are you going to stare at each other? It's almost time to depart.” Amane nudged Seina's back from behind.

Stirring up the two who seemed stuck in a rut, Amane was just like back then.

“Ahhh! Yes, no!”

Kiriko quickly sat down at her seat and began preparing for departure.

“Uh, um… What should I do…?”

“Captain, just sit down here. We'll handle all the details.” Amane tugged Seina's jacket hem and sat him down in his seat, then began the departure checks just like Kiriko.

“Initiating Captain's initial authentication registration.”

As Kiriko's voice rang, scanning plates appeared around Seina, much more sophisticated than the ones used during roll call in the dorms.

“Scan complete. Registration to Kamidake finalized. Initiating Kamidake startup program.”

Just then, a faint childlike laugh reached Seina's ears.

“Ahahahaha.”

“!!?”

Seina spun around in surprise. Behind him, a spherical, aurora-like light appeared. The rainbow-colored light flickered and faded in complex shapes, forming a tree-like figure.

(This atmosphere… it's just like Seto-sama's…) Seina recalled the bridge of Seto's ship.

“Engines one through six activated, rising to planned output values. Engines one and four rising to normal operating range.”

“All blocks initiating smoothly. Primary startup complete.”

“Main key unlocking. Captain, please acknowledge.”

“A-Aye! Main key unlocked!”

With Seina's voice, the massive white pillar reaching to the ceiling that had been pinning Kamidake down dissolved into particles of light and vanished.

“Main key unlock confirmed. Key anchor unlocking. Captain, please acknowledge.”

“Key anchor unlocked!”

Round plates placed in various locations on the floor of the container rose up, and the floor shattered around them. As the floor fragments disappeared into particles of light, Kamidake slowly descended.

“Kamidake activation complete! All systems green, no abnormalities!”

“Looks like it started up safely.”

The main screen showed Airi, Seto, Minaho, Tennyo, Hakuryo, Elma, Minami, Mikami, Mitoto, and the engineer who performed the final check on Kamidake. The entire Kamidake crew stood and saluted.

“Special mission ship Kamidake, belonging to the GP Decoy Division, will now depart for its first training voyage.”

“Very well. Permission granted to depart. Proceed with caution.” Airi nodded with satisfaction at Kiriko's report and returned the salute.

Following Airi, everyone present saluted in farewell.

As the Kamidake descended into the passageway leading to the launch port, it began to emit a high-pitched roar, a powerful sound that belied its small hull.

“No abnormalities in the engine or any blocks”

“No obstacles on Kamidake's planned route!”

As Amane and Kiriko report, everyone's attention turns to Seina.

“Haa…” Seina took a deep breath as if to steady his nerves, then declared, “Kamidake, launch!”

“Kamidake, launching!”

Without a jolt, the view outside suddenly began rushing by at incredible speed. Seconds later, Kamidake was embraced by the twinkling stars and the pitch-black expanse of space.

【Tenchi Muyo! GXP Volume 5: The End】

# Afterword

Dear Reader… And so, without further ado!

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**Afterword Theatre Part 2**

After getting consecutive call rejections and conversation refusals from his parents' house… the shrine office… and the Masaki household, Seina was venting a little to Ryo-Ohki. Of course, he planned to cut the conversation short the moment Ryo-Ohki showed any sign of annoyance. Fortunately, Ryo-Ohki wagged her tail happily, occasionally chiming in with Seina's complaints, and kept him company with a delighted expression the whole time.

“Thanks, Ryo-Ohki-chan. Well, I should probably hang up now.”

“Meow, meow!” Ryo-Ohki replied, bouncing up and down.

After ending the call, Seina tilted his head slightly, looking a bit puzzled.

“…… Was is just my imagination? I feel like I could vaguely understand what Ryo-Ohki-chan was saying…”

It wasn't until a little later that Seina learned Ryo-Ohki's meows were a kind of high-speed language, and that if you listened for a while, you could grasp the general meaning. Though he figured it out so quickly thanks to his Bio-Enhanced hearing…

“That's right! While I'm at it, I might as well ask Kai about the latest news. He still doesn't know his own background, so I have to be careful with what I say.”

With that thought, Seina immediately dialed Kai’s house number. Thanks to the adorable Ryo-Ohki, Seina had managed to shift his mood, but…

“Hello, this is Masaki~~~”

Kai was even more hyper than Seina. Though this was actually his usual way of speaking, it still caught Seina off guard a little after so long.

“…Long time no talk. It's me, Kai!”

“Whoa, is that Seina’s voice!? Hah, you sound good.”

“That voice? Oh, right…” Seina remembered Kai couldn't see the video feed.

The phone on the other end didn't have a camera. Wondering how the video was possible, Seina had once asked Elma about it. According to her, the system analyzed echoes and other sounds during the call to determine shape, material, and even color, then processed it into a

visual image using CG. However, the performance of Earth's receivers meant the sound noise was too severe to fully reproduce the image from that alone. Therefore, they supplemented the image using ultra-high-altitude footage from the observation probes in Earth's satellite orbit, specifically those monitoring the protected zones.

“Yeah, well, I'm the same as ever. …More importantly, how's school? What are people saying now that I'm suddenly gone?”

“What do you mean… Well, when the teacher explained it, everyone was shocked. They couldn't believe there was a school that would accept Seina.”

“Haha… So that's what surprised them?”

“Since Seina left, every day has been incredibly peaceful… almost boring. …Oh, right, they did say they were worried about one thing: what if you get into trouble over there and get deported?”

“Ugh… Got it. I'll try my best not to cause trouble. So, how's things at my place?”

“Smooth sailing, business is booming. Uncle, Auntie, and Yoshiko-chan all looked busy. More importantly, are you getting along with my sister? You live so close now, you should seize the opportunity, ha ha ha… Gah!!”

Thud! With a dull sound, Tsukiko's heel drop landed squarely on Kai's head.

As Kai lay face-down, clutching his head and enduring the pain, Tsukiko stood behind him, her leg raised exactly where his head had been, displaying her beautiful leg line. But that wasn't all that was visible. From Seina's perspective, Tsukiko's skirt was completely transparent.

“Don't say vulgar things like 'seize the opportunity'! …Who on earth are you talking to, Kai?”

“…… S-Seina”

“Huh!?”

Tsukiko, who knew Seina had gone to space, realized the image was visible from Seina's side. Blushing bright red, she quickly lowered her leg and smoothed her skirt. Snatching the receiver from Kai, she roughly pushed her son aside as he still endured the pain.

“Um, hello… Seina-chan?” Tsukiko asked timidly, as if to confirm.

“…It's been a long time…” Seina blushed bright red as he replied awkwardly.

To Tsukiko, Seina was a friend of Kai, almost like a son. But after getting caught up in the husband remarks she'd made to egg Kiriko on earlier, she'd started to see him a little bit as a man.

And Tsukiko, who looked young enough to be Kiriko's sister, possessed more than enough charm to make Seina notice her as a woman.

Furthermore, Tsukiko's underwear, which has made him even more aware of the opposite sex, was ..... well, that's what he saw.

"……(Did you see under my skirt?)"

"……(I saw it)"

Their silence confirmed that fact to each other.

The End

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As Seina tells Minami in the text, starting with this volume, the timeline of events diverges from the anime version of GXP. The events now occur about half a year earlier than the practical training, with the crew boarding the first Kamidake. While the overall plot remains unchanged, I expect more detailed episodes will be added or modified compared to the anime.

Now, the next volume will center on Ryoko Balta and Neeju Na Melmas. Ryoko, whose crew and family are held hostage by Tarrant, who orders Seina's assassination. Neeju is a mysterious girl he meets on Jurai.

Furthermore, Seina will discover the unexpected true identity of a certain individual—— So, see you in the next volume.

Kajishima Masaki